

Gov. Pritzker Announces Proposal To Create Unified Early Childhood State Agency

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CHICAGO — Today, Governor Pritzker was joined by Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton, Deputy Governor Grace Hou, Deputy Governor Martin Torres, elected officials, and state agency directors at the Carole Robertson Center for Learning to

announce a proposal to create a new state agency to house all early childhood programs and funding. The new unified agency will provide a more equitable, integrated, and holistic system of services for young children and families in Illinois.

“We need a governance system that is unified in its approach to serving families, working with providers, and promoting equity,” said Governor JB Pritzker. “Our Smart Start Illinois plan served as the catalyst for this transition, but this new agency will cover so much more. From ISBE’s Early Childhood Block Grants and DCFS’ day care licensing program to DHS’ child care, home visiting and early intervention services, soon all of these programs will be administered under the same agency.”

The proposal builds on Governor Pritzker’s work to make Illinois the best state in the nation for families raising young children, with the nation’s best early childhood education and childcare system. Currently, services are housed in three separate agencies—the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), the Illinois Department of Human Services (DHS), and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS).

To initiate the multi-year process, Governor Pritzker is signing an Executive Order, and will work with the General Assembly on legislation in the spring of 2024.

Early Childhood Transition Director Ann Whalen

Education expert Ann Whalen will serve as Early Childhood Transition Director, working out of ISBE and in close collaboration with state agencies and the governor’s office.

Ann Whalen has served as the Director of Policy for Advance Illinois since 2019, where she works on education advocacy issues including addressing Illinois’ teacher shortage, the improved use of data to drive decision making, social-and-emotional learning, education funding, and more. She has an extensive background in education policy and implementation at the local, state, and federal levels.

Before joining Advance, Ann spent two years at Denver Public Schools focused on academic administration. Previously, Ann served as the Director of the United States Department of Education Implementation and Support Unit, helping to administer the Obama administration’s Race to the Top program. Additionally, she served as Acting Assistant Secretary in the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education where she focused on improving academic outcomes. Prior to her work in Washington, Ann was Deputy Chief Education Officer at Chicago Public Schools. She holds a BA in Political Science from Stanford University.

Advisory Committee

Governor Pritzker is establishing an external advisory committee to seek input from stakeholders across the state in preparation for the proposal. The committee will be chaired by Bela Moté and work closely with Ann Whalen.

Bela Moté is the Chief Executive Officer of the Carole Robertson Center for Learning, one of the largest early childhood and youth development organizations in Chicago, serving close to 2,500 children through their childcare centers and affiliate programs. She previously led the Early Childhood Funding Commission.

Early Childhood State Agency Proposal

The new unified agency will unify the following programs under a single agency:

- The Early Childhood Block Grant at ISBE, which funds Preschool for All and the Prevention Initiative home-visiting program
- The Child Care Assistance Program, Home-Visiting, and Early Intervention services at DHS
- Day care licensing currently managed by DCFS

Governor Pritzker established the [Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding](#) (“Early Childhood Funding Commission”) to analyze and make recommendations on funding goals and mechanisms to provide equitable access to high-quality early childhood education and care services for all children from birth to age five. The Commission concluded its efforts in 2021 with the recommendation to consolidate all early childhood programs into a new agency, making it a more accessible system for providers and families.

The unified agency will address the difficulties that providers and families experience when navigating three different agencies. Having a governance system that is unified in its approach to serving families, working with providers, and promoting equity is why several states—including Alabama, Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Massachusetts, Oregon, and New Mexico—already created new state agencies dedicated solely to early childhood.

The change will further advance the Pritzker administration’s transformative investments in comprehensive early childhood education and care, including Smart Start Illinois. Beginning with a \$250 million investment this year, Smart Start Illinois is a multi-year plan to eliminate preschool deserts, increase funding to childcare providers to raise wages and quality, and reach more vulnerable families with early support.

Smart Start Illinois demonstrates the state's ongoing commitment to children, families, teachers, and childcare providers. The \$250 million investment in FY24 includes:

- \$75 million additional for the Early Childhood Block Grant to put Illinois on a path to creating more than 20,000 new Pre-K spots for every child who wants one
- \$130 million for nation-leading Childcare Workforce Compensation Contracts that will stabilize providers and give childcare workers a raise
- An additional \$40 million for Early Intervention programs to enhance services for families and give providers a raise
- \$5 million to expand the Illinois Department of Human Services' Home Visiting Program so more families who want it can receive this early support

In addition to Smart Start investments, other investments being made in the early Childhood Education Space include:

- \$100 million in capital dollars for early childhood providers to expand existing facilities and build new facilities
- \$70 million for the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)
- \$12 million in new funding for scholarships and apprenticeships to expand the childcare workforce
- \$1.6 million to launch the [Dolly Parton Imagination Library](#), a statewide literacy initiative to send free books to children from birth-through age five

"As a working mom, I know how important it is for families to be able to navigate getting access to quality, affordable childcare and early learning programs," said Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton. "Today's announcement isn't just about the system, but the people within this system—parents, families, educators and most importantly, the children who will have greater access to resources they need to thrive. By creating a more efficient and equitable system, we are better serving our Illinois family."

"Our shared mission across State agencies is enhancing equitable access to early childhood programs and services in support of holistic development for all children," said Dulce Quintero, Secretary, Illinois Department of Human Services. "We are so proud to be a part of this historic investment in Illinois children and their shared futures."

"Illinois is a national leader in expanding and investing in early childhood. Illinois has truly set the bar for the nation," said State Superintendent of Education Dr. Tony Sanders. "But we also recognize that our current model of governance and administration can be confusing for families looking for care and for providers looking for funding or guidance. Today, under the leadership of the Pritzker Administration, ISBE looks forward to collaborating on improving coordination, equity, and outcomes

for the many excellent early education and care providers across the state and the young minds they serve.”

“The department has always been proud of our role and setting high standards as it relates to licensing,” said Marc D. Smith Director of Illinois DCFS. “When change has been needed in Illinois, the Governor has led the way through innovation and bold action; we are pleased to work alongside the team creating best practices under this new agency.”

“The foundation of a child’s success and well-being is built starting the moment they are born,” said Senate Majority Leader Kimberly A. Lightford (D-Maywood). “As a state, it is our duty to provide the necessary support and resources to build such stability. The creation of this unique agency will break ground on our transition to a whole, trauma-informed approach to meeting children’s diverse needs.”

“A new state agency completely dedicated to the young child that will blend the important elements of early childhood education and care into one department to create bright futures for Illinois children,” said State Sen. Julie Morrison (D-Deerfield). “These coordinated supports will make it easier for families and providers in Illinois and I am excited to work with Governor Pritzker and his team to get this agency up and running.”

“As a strong advocate for education, I’m committed to prioritizing early childhood education that encourages children to be lifelong learners,” said State Sen. Meg Loughran Cappel (D-Shorewood). “This will streamline services and access for all early childhood providers and families across the state. I thank Governor Pritzker for putting our students first and making early childhood education a priority here in Illinois.”

“Illinois’ children deserve access to the best early childhood education and care services, and this transformation will have a notable impact across the state,” said State Senator Lakesia Collins (D-Chicago). “I am grateful to Governor Pritzker and everyone that is collaborating to make this change possible.”

“Early childhood care and education are key to creating a strong foundation for learning and success,” said House Deputy Majority Leader Elizabeth ‘Lisa’ Hernandez (D-Cicero). “I look forward to collaborating with Governor Pritzker to ensure that we continue making Illinois the best state in the nation for families, with equity at the center of every policy.”

“We want to make sure that every child receives the attention and prioritization they deserve,” said House Assistant Majority Leader Camille Lilly (D-Chicago). “I

appreciate the partnership from Governor Pritzker and his administration with the Early Childhood Funding Commission, and I'm excited to see the strong impact this new agency will have across Illinois."

"Over the past year, I've spent considerable time with families and providers, listening to their experiences, struggles, and needs," said State Rep. Joyce Mason (D-Gurnee). Having one agency dedicated to ECEC will make it easier for families to explore their options and for providers to navigate funding and standards. Most importantly, it will better ensure that every child in Illinois will receive equitable, high-quality education and care. Together with the SMART START Illinois initiative introduced this year, Illinois is working hard to be the very best state for families to raise their children."

"Children in all corners of the state deserve high quality early childhood education," said State Rep. Maura Hirschauer (D-Batavia). "Helping families and children by expanding access to child care and early childcare education will dramatically impact their future success. Establishing an office of early childhood education and housing all resources under one 'roof' will provide better support for daycare providers and families, ensuring that Illinois is the best place for families to raise their children."

"Uniting the efforts of public servants under a dedicated agency devoted to strengthening early childhood conditions for all Illinois kids is a major step forward," said State Rep. Mary Beth Cany (D-Arlington Heights). "This step is by no means the end to lawmaking efforts working towards a better life for our children. However, this team of professionals with the work already being done in the General Assembly creates the opportunity to grow further partnerships and find smarter solutions to the challenges facing Illinois families, rather than our current siloed approach."

"I am thrilled to see Governor Pritzker take this extremely important step towards improving outcomes for both children and parents across Illinois," said State Rep. Laura Faver Dias (D-Grayslake). "The creation of an agency to oversee early childhood programs will help Illinois manage out-of-control childcare costs, provide a better quality of care, and improve childcare access to parents across Illinois. The strength of Illinois' unified childcare efforts will make Illinois a better place to raise a child."