

# Governor Pritzker Announces 5,800 New Pre-K Spots Created By Smart Start

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BELLEVILLE – Governor JB Pritzker and the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) today announced the addition of 5,886 new preschool seats in preschool deserts—areas of the state with too few publicly funded preschool seats to serve 80% of low-income 3- and 4-year-olds in the area. As part of Governor JB Pritzker’s broader Smart Start initiative, ISBE originally aimed to add 5,000 new seats and exceeded the goal by 18%, expanding access to early childhood education to more than 5,800 additional children in preschool deserts statewide. ISBE also expanded services to families with babies and

toddlers from birth to age 3, serving 1,130 additional children. View the list of [Preschool for All grantees](#), [Preschool for All – Expansion grantees](#), and [Prevention Initiative grantees](#).

“At its core, Smart Start is about making sure parents have the support they need to raise a family and children have the resources they need to succeed—no matter their background or zip code,” said Governor JB Pritzker. “Our goal of eliminating early childhood education deserts is well on its way with ISBE’s exceptional first-year strides, and I look forward to seeing where the next year of this program will take us.”

“Access to high-quality, publicly funded preschool is life-changing for families with young children,” said State Superintendent of Education Dr. Tony Sanders. “High-quality early learning experiences equip children with the social-emotional, early math, and early literacy skills that lay the foundation for lifelong learning. I am so proud of our team here at the Illinois State Board of Education for far surpassing our initial goal, maximizing state dollars, and bringing us closer than ever to ensuring universal access to preschool statewide.”

The fiscal year 2024 state budget dedicated an additional \$75 million in state funding for ISBE’s Early Childhood Block Grant, as part of the Governor’s broader Smart Start initiative to improve early childhood education and services. The Smart Start plan includes eliminating preschool deserts within four years to ensure low-income 3- and 4-year-olds statewide have access to high-quality, publicly funded early learning experiences. ISBE’s efforts in the first year of the plan put the state on track to meet the goal of universal access to preschool even sooner.

ISBE’s Early Childhood Block Grant funds both half-day and full-day preschool programs. ISBE’s FY 2024 grants will serve:

- 5,383 additional children in Preschool for All (half-day preschool) with \$20,993,700 in grants awarded to 84 programs in preschool deserts
- 503 additional children in Preschool for All Expansion (full-day preschool) with \$4,275,500 in grants awarded to 11 programs in preschool deserts

ISBE’s Early Childhood Block Grant also funds Prevention Initiative programs, which provide services for expectant parents and children from birth to age 3, including doula and home visiting services. ISBE’s FY 2024 grants will serve:

- 428 additional children in Prevention Initiative Home Visiting with \$2,696,400 in grants awarded to six programs in preschool deserts
- 702 additional children in Prevention Initiative Center-Based with \$9,394,866 in grants awarded to 22 programs in preschool deserts

Since FY 2019, ISBE has endeavored, in addition to awarding funds to new or expanding programs, to provide funding to increase quality in programs previously awarded and in good standing. In FY 2024, ISBE awarded an additional approximately \$8.4 million in grants to existing programs to support increases in quality. In particular, ISBE encouraged programs to consider using the funding to boost salaries for early childhood educators. Early childhood teachers working in preschool settings outside of school districts typically receive significantly less pay than their grade school and high school counterparts. The \$8.4 million can help address the pay disparity to ensure highly skilled early childhood educators receive competitive wages.

The grants described above provide funding for programs outside of Chicago. State statute requires ISBE to first award 37% -- \$27,750,000 in FY 2024 -- of the total Early Childhood Block Grant appropriation to Chicago Public Schools to administer locally to fund access to preschool and early care programs in Chicago. After this, statute requires ISBE to fund programs in good standing that were funded in previous fiscal years and to award 25% of the appropriation to fund Prevention Initiative programming. Then, after expanding access to more children by awarding funds to new and expanding programs, remaining dollars provide quality increases to previously awarded programs.

ISBE launched a statewide campaign in April to promote the application for the funds to providers in [preschool deserts](#). Prior to the release of the grant application, ISBE solicited feedback from stakeholders to ensure the grant application was as clear and streamlined as possible. ISBE received applications from 190 providers with 84% of applicants located in preschool deserts.

The Smart Start initiative builds on Gov. Pritzker's commitment to early childhood education. Gov. Pritzker has increased annual funding for the Early Childhood Block Grant by \$179.4 million since taking office. The FY 2024 appropriation for the Early Childhood Block Grant totals \$673.1 million and serves more than 123,000 children.

ISBE will release the application for the next round of preschool funding early next year with the goal of further closing gaps in access to preschool in underserved areas of the state, pending FY 2025 state appropriations.

“Our children deserve to be prioritized and investing in Smart Start will put the next generation on the path to unlocking their full potential,” said Rep. Jay Hoffman (D-Swansea). “This commitment builds out our early childhood education system, helps working families and promises a better future for Illinois.”