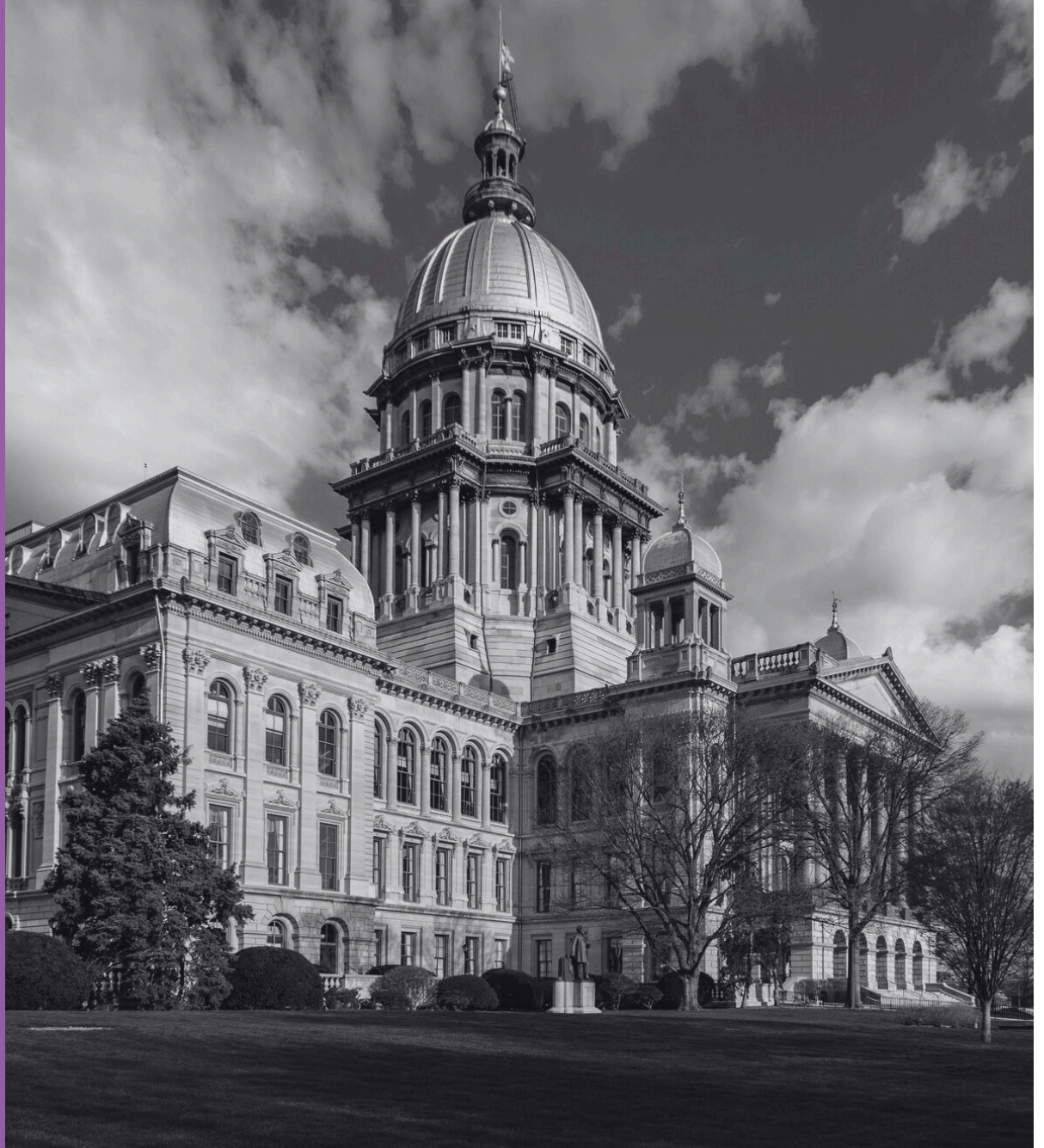


JANUARY 2025



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powered by illinois action for children

2025 LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

FISCAL YEAR 2026

Make Common Sense Changes to Child Care Licensing (H3439/SB2446)

THE ISSUE

Child care providers have consistently raised concerns about the Department of Children and Family Services' (DCFS) licensing functions, particularly regarding delays in processing background checks and a general lack of transparency. These challenges create significant barriers to hiring qualified staff, ultimately impacting the overall quality and stability of child care programs. Too often, providers identify and are willing to hire well-qualified candidates, but due to prolonged background check delays and insufficient communication from DCFS, many potential hires become frustrated and seek employment elsewhere.

This ongoing issue not only strains child care providers but also exacerbates workforce shortages in the early care and education sector. To ensure that children and families receive high-quality early learning experiences, the child care licensing infrastructure must be strengthened, providing greater efficiency, accountability, and support to rebuild trust with providers and allow them to operate effectively.

OUR ASK

To enhance efficiency, transparency, and communication, the Department should establish a background check portal to reduce hiring delays, align licensing timelines with federal CCDBG requirements, and house all DCFS licensing policies and procedures in one central website in multiple languages.

Additionally, improving responsiveness to both English and non-English speaking providers and simplifying child enrollment in child care programs will help strengthen the early childhood workforce and expand access to quality care as we transition to the new Illinois Department of Early Childhood.

Increase Investment in Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) Scholarships

THE ISSUE

The Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) scholarship program, established in 2021, aims to address Illinois' shortage of qualified early childhood educators by supporting credential attainment and degree advancement to build a robust workforce pipeline. As part of the state's Smart Start initiative, ECACE helps expand access to high-quality early childhood education by supporting the approximately 2,700 new positions (according to Illinois Department of Employment Security data) needed to accommodate 20,000 additional preschool seats by 2027.

The program prioritizes individuals already working in early childhood education, many of whom juggle work, school, and family responsibilities. In the 2023-2024 academic year, ECACE awarded scholarships to nearly 4,700 students across 95% of Illinois counties, with 50% being adult learners over 30, 89% being women, and 76% having a family contribution of \$10,000 or less. Demand for the scholarship remains high, as nearly 3,000 early childhood educators applied for 2024-2025 funding within just four weeks, yet limited funding left approximately 2,300 applicants (75%) without support.

OUR ASK

Include the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) and Illinois Student Assistance Commission's (ISAC) request for \$20 million for ECACE scholarships in the FY26 state budget. This will help continue the state's investment in building a robust pipeline of qualified educators and strengthening the early childhood education workforce.

Sustain and Strengthen Smart Start Child Care

THE ISSUE

Smart Start Workforce Grants provide stable, upfront funding to child care programs, enabling them to cover operational costs and invest in high-quality staff without increasing tuition or Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) co-pays for families. These grants help strengthen the early childhood workforce by ensuring competitive wages through a required wage floor, which supports staff retention and attracts new educators to the field.

As the state enters the third year of the Smart Start Initiative, maintaining full funding for the Smart Start Workforce Grants and other Smart Start Child Care workforce initiatives in FY26 is critical. With the expiration of federal relief funding, continued state investment is necessary to prevent disruptions in services, sustain workforce gains, and ensure families have access to affordable, high-quality child care.

OUR ASK

Include at least an increase of \$90 million for the Smart Start Child Care budget for FY26.

Create More Community-Based Child Care through Early Childhood Construction Grants

THE ISSUE

High-quality early care and education facilities play a vital role in fostering young children's relationships and preparing them for school success. In collaboration with the Pritzker administration and the General Assembly, the state secured \$100 million in 2019 for the Early Childhood Construction Grant (ECCG) program under the Rebuild Illinois capital plan, while also providing training, technical assistance, and policy recommendations to enhance the program's effectiveness.

In 2022, the Capital Development Board (CDB) allocated \$60 million in ECCG funding to public school districts and non-profit early childhood center operators. However, of the eight grant recipients, only two were non-profit community-based organizations (CBOs). Unlike school districts, child care centers—particularly non-profit CBOs—do not have access to alternative state funding for facility improvements and serve as primary providers of care for infants and toddlers, underscoring the need for greater investment in these critical institutions.

OUR ASK

Allocate the remaining \$40 million in ECCG funding by FY26, while ensuring the Capital Development Board and the Governor's Office equitably distribute grants between public schools and non-profit organizations. Priority should be given to addressing the needs of community-based organizations (CBOs) while upholding a commitment to fair and inclusive support across all early childhood education service delivery systems.



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