



# START EARLY'S ILLINOIS POLICY AGENDA



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# OUR CURRENT CONTEXT

Illinois, along with the rest of the world, has weathered great adversity over the last three years. The many harms and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic will be long-lasting not only for many families, especially those who suffered the loss of family members, but for the early childhood system as well. In addition to the devastating effects on the health and well-being of families and communities, many early childhood professionals lost their businesses, and suffered incredible stress trying to keep their doors open and support colleagues and families experiencing trauma. Inequities in access to early childhood programs and the workforce crisis were greatly exacerbated by the pandemic as well, leaving a long road to recovery.



Despite these challenges, Illinois took critical steps to safeguard and stabilize the early childhood system, committing COVID relief and recovery funds to grant programs for child care providers, workforce bonuses, investments in scholarships, and more. As we enter a new phase of recovery, rebuilding, and hopefully, reinvention, Illinois is poised to dramatically strengthen and grow our early childhood system through Governor Pritzker's *Smart Start* initiative. *Smart Start* will bring unprecedented investments in early childhood programs and services, new approaches to addressing staff compensation and program quality, and key structural improvements.

Although there is every reason to be optimistic about the transformative nature of the *Smart Start* initiative, the Illinois Policy Team is prepared to fight for all that the plan promises. The goals and objectives outlined in our Policy Agenda for FY24-27 reflect our top priorities and most promising opportunities for progress, and we are eager to contribute Start Early's particular strengths and expertise to the work ahead for Illinois' early childhood system over the next four years. We can't and won't do this work alone, however. It is only through collaborative, aligned efforts with many public and private sector partners that we will ensure children and families, early childhood professionals, and communities can realize true impact.







# OUR VISION

The comprehensive work of Start Early and its Illinois Policy Team is grounded in the fact that the first five years of a child's life are the most critical for healthy development and long-term well-being. Furthermore, research has demonstrated time and time again that quality early care and learning programs and services play a critical role in supporting healthy development and achieving positive outcomes for young children and their families. Unfortunately, the current early childhood system is inadequate for achieving impact at scale. Not enough quality programs and services are available to meet the needs of Illinois's families—particularly those living in communities left under-resourced by decades of historical and institutional racism.

Our vision is for Illinois' early childhood system to be designed, implemented and sustained to successfully achieve Illinois' goal of equitably providing a continuum of high-quality early childhood services to children before birth and through age 5. To best support all of our state's families, services must be culturally, linguistically and ability responsive. Our work is cemented in our commitment to advancing racial equity and heavily informed by research, practice, and the lived experiences of the families and professionals we serve at Start Early.

Our latest policy agenda, covering state fiscal years 2024 through 2027, lays out our vision for policy and systems change that will promote access to quality early care and learning programs and services and effectively meet the needs of the children and families who need them most. Below we share an overview of the Illinois Policy Team's key strategies and goals for the next four years.





# OUR STRATEGIES

In order to achieve this vision and address the many barriers to access to early childhood programs for every Illinois family, Start Early's Illinois Policy Team (IPT) works at the systems level to create the enabling conditions that support a sustainable, equitable, and accessible system of quality early care and learning in our state. We employ a number of strategies to create those enabling conditions, including:



## Thought partnership, leadership & consultation

We continually develop, deepen, and share comprehensive cross-system content knowledge on aspects of early care and learning policies, programs, services and related topics. We conduct background research, perform data and policy analyses, and synthesize complex information to use in developing policies and programs. This all enables us to provide expertise and support on policy solutions to systems leaders within Illinois as well as in our national networks.

## Coalition & partnership efforts

We participate in, build, and support coalitions of advocates and other stakeholders to leverage the power of collective action. We partner with other organizations, parents, and practitioners to identify shared policy and advocacy priorities and collaborate to make change. We also actively work to create alignment across partners/stakeholders to build greater influence.

## Administrative advocacy

We work with administrative and governmental agencies that have authority and discretion to change rules and regulations relevant to implementation of early childhood programs and services. Through administrative advocacy, we create or revise policies and procedures to ensure optimal impact of these programs. Administrative advocacy activities can include participating in advisory bodies to state agencies, providing recommendations for regulatory language, and/or advising and working directly with public partners on an individual basis.

## Legislative advocacy

We work with elected officials and their staff in the Illinois General Assembly and the Illinois congressional delegation to sustain and bolster investments in foundational early learning and care programs and strengthen statutory language that undergirds those programs and services.

## Outreach & engagement

Our outreach and engagement strategy is primarily focused on developing bidirectional relationships with families, practitioners, and other stakeholders most proximate to early care and learning issues. This ensures our policy and advocacy priorities are not only grounded in research but are also informed by family and provider voice and reflective of their priorities, expertise, and preferred solutions. We work to increase stakeholders' knowledge of early care and learning programs and critical issues facing the field and provide timely updates on topics of policy that are relevant for early care and learning program leadership, staff and families. We also mobilize practitioners, families, and other stakeholders to take action to support the early care and learning system in Illinois.

The intensity of our work on any given issue varies depending on our role and level of expertise. We lead efforts, often in partnership with other organizations, on issues most core to early care and learning and areas of organizational expertise; however, for other priorities, we may serve as a substantive contributor under the leadership of our partners or as a supporter, a role in which we demonstrate that support through less intensive activities, such as signing on to letters, filing witness slips, and providing an early childhood voice and perspective at systems-building tables outside of our system.





# OUR GOALS

IPT organizes its work toward a sustainable, equitable, and accessible system of high-quality early care and learning around four primary systems-level goals. These goals support the conditions needed for families to experience high-quality early childhood programs, which we define as programs that offer ambitious interactions and instruction and a supportive environment for children and families, and have effective leaders, collaborative teachers, and involved families. Those goals include:



## Strong infrastructure

The early care and learning system is extremely complex, fragmented, and under resourced—conditions which can create inequities of all kinds for families and early childhood professionals, blunt effectiveness of programs and services, and threaten the overall sustainability and impact of the system. Families’ needs vary, and it’s important to preserve a range of options for them, while providers would benefit from more coherent, accessible funding opportunities. With this in mind, we work to increase investments in the early childhood system, strengthen and streamline system governance, integrate and align supports across the system, engage and empower communities to have a better defined and resourced role in system governance, and strengthen data systems and research to build stronger, more cohesive, system infrastructure.

## Well-designed and administered programs and services

Decades of research support the connection between quality early care and learning programs and services and positive outcomes for children and families; however, programs and services must be designed and administered to ensure full access and responsiveness to the evolving needs and desires of families, communities, and early childhood professionals. The Illinois Policy Team continuously identifies areas for improvement and optimization across the core early childhood programs and services in Illinois—child care, Early Intervention (IDEA Part C), evidence-based early childhood home visiting and doula services, Early Childhood Block Grant programs (Preschool for All, Preschool for All Expansion, and Prevention Initiative), and Early/Head Start—and engages with national, state, and local system leaders to strengthen policies and implementation.

## Thriving, representative workforce

Early childhood professionals are the lifeblood of early childhood programs—children and families literally can’t be served without them. Working with young children and their



families is complex, important work. Research shows that the qualifications of, and supports provided to, early childhood professionals are critical for providing quality programs and services and achieving positive child and family outcomes. Further, research shows the benefits to children and families when they have access to teachers, home visitors, doulas, therapists and other providers who reflect their culture, race and language. Unfortunately, the early childhood system is in the midst of a national workforce crisis, which has significantly decreased access to programs and services for families and children in Illinois, and across the country. Addressing this crisis is among the most urgent priorities for the Illinois Policy Team, and as such we are heavily focused on advancing strategies that attract and increase retention of representative staff, ease pathways toward higher qualifications, and strengthen the perception and reputation of early childhood professionals.

## Healthy, safe & economically secure families

Families and children can benefit most from all that quality early childhood programs have to offer when they are healthy, safe, and economically secure. Lack of access to healthcare, unstable housing, inadequate wages, and lack of paid sick and parental leave not only present serious barriers to participating in early childhood programs but are also associated with poor outcomes for families and children. Recognizing the importance of health and well-being to positive child and family outcomes, we work to improve early learning programs to enhance the opportunity for health, mental health and other supports to be delivered within programs and also support policies and initiatives that improve access to these critical supports.

STRONG INFRASTRUCTURE

- Increase state funding for core early childhood programs by at least \$1 billion, and ensure additional investments needed for program and system infrastructure supports.
- Establish a coherent, consolidated early childhood administrative/governance structure centering the experiences of families and providers, especially those families furthest from opportunities and with the most complex circumstances.
- Improve the mechanisms by which providers receive program funds to provide greater stability and adequacy.
- Establish a statewide funded early childhood local collaboration system with defined functions connected to aligned, effective regional and state council infrastructure.
- Increase family, community, and field voices in state decision-making (shared governance) by establishing a system of supports with staff to ensure authentic family engagement and full participation of families and providers.
- Establish and strengthen public-private advisory and other policy making tables by centering family and provider voice and lived experience to improve two-way communication to effectively share and receive information with families across the state.
- Strengthen the statewide infrastructure for children’s social emotional supports such as I/ECMHC, the pyramid model and other best practices to enhance program quality, support the workforce and reduce expulsions.
- Establish a system to provide inclusion support to early care and learning programs across all settings.
- Build a statewide system for Universal Newborn Screening and Support (UNSS) services delivered at the community-level, including identification of public and private funding and ensuring integration of UNSS systems into broader prenatal-to-three health and early learning services.
- Strengthen early childhood data systems, capacity, and the utilization of data in policy/decision making
- Improve and /expand early childhood facilities through the provision of technical assistance and financial resources, such as the Early Childhood Construction Grant program.

WELL-DESIGNED AND ADMINISTERED PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

Early Intervention

- Increase number of children served in the Early Intervention program, with a focus on children under age 1 and children who meet automatic eligibility criteria.
- Reduce service delays by modifying and expanding models of service delivery, with a focus on addressing disparities in race and geography as well as for families with complex needs (i.e., those experiencing homelessness or substantiated cases of abuse and neglect).
- Redesign funding and payment structures to better support the full cost of providing services, to provide for team planning and to eliminate disincentives for serving families due to race, geography or complex needs.
- Strengthen direct communication with providers and families to increase active engagement in improving the system and their ability to advocate for their children.

Early Childhood Block Grant

- Ensure the supply of adequately funded early childhood slots in a range of settings (including full-day, full-year), particularly in areas of highest need, through both expansion of services and strengthening existing funding levels to meet the cost of providing quality programming.
- Increase equitable distribution of funds and program slots across schools and community-based programs.
- Increase supply of adequately funded center-based slots for children birth-three.

Child Care

- Improve supply and quality of child care throughout the state, with a focus on infant-toddler slots, inclusion of children with delays or disabilities, and equitable access to contracts for all types of providers.
- Increase number of families and children accessing the Child Care Assistance Program through improvements to the Child Care Assistance Program application process, and expanded eligibility (income and categorical).
- Strengthen child care licensing system through improvements to the background check system, monitoring process, and improved communication between child care licensing and early childhood educators..

Home Visiting & Doula Services

- Increase cohesion across funders and models of home visiting (and doula services in home visiting programs) by streamlining activities like funding, monitoring, data collection (including disaggregated data).
- Strengthen home visiting and doula connections to other systems, including Early Intervention, child welfare, primary care, and mental health systems.
- Improve family participation rates in home visiting and doula programs through increased public awareness of the program and supporting the development of new models or promising practices to better meet family and community needs.



## THRIVING, REPRESENTATIVE WORKFORCE

- Increase recruitment and retention of early childhood professionals
  - Substantially increase compensation and ensure competitive benefits across the early childhood field.
  - Improve working conditions for the early childhood workforce, e.g. work hours, ratios and groups sizes, access to professional development wellness supports
  - Strengthen opportunities for professional development.
- Increase credential, degree, license, and endorsement attainment for the early childhood field
  - Expand access to scholarships, financial assistance and other supports for candidates
  - Develop strategies to target information to likely candidates about credential/degree attainment and financial assistant opportunities, such as CDA for credit opportunity.
  - Implement and expand apprenticeship pilot programs
  - Align credentials and education requirements across early childhood professions
- Strengthen the perception and reputation of the early childhood field



## HEALTHY, SAFE & ECONOMICALLY SECURE FAMILIES

- Strengthen the alignment and integration of the health and early care and learning systems.
- Inform and support policies and initiatives that promote safe and healthy early care and learning environments.
- Increase access to culturally- and linguistically-responsive health care for families with young children and pregnant people, including preventive and specialty care, mental health and substance use recovery care.
- Improve access to public and private health insurance for families with young children and pregnant people.
- Increase economic supports for families with young children, including paid family and medical leave, access to public benefits and tax credits.
- Increase food security for families with young children, with a focus on improved access to SNAP and WIC programs including increased access to local healthy food options.
- Inform and support policies and initiatives that promote safe and healthy neighborhoods, housing and environments and positive social and community supports.





