



ILLINOIS

March 2024

Honorable Emanuel “Chris” Welch, Speaker, Illinois House of Representatives
Honorable Don Harmon, President, Illinois Senate
Honorable Tony McCombie, Minority Leader, Illinois House of Representatives
Honorable John Curran, Minority Leader, Illinois Senate
Members of the Illinois General Assembly

Dear Illinois Leaders:

As business executives from across Illinois, we write to share our priorities for the FY2025 state budget – recommendations based on research as well as our concerns for the growth of the state’s economy and support for employers and the workforce.

The ties between a strong economy, business success, and early childhood care and education are becoming increasingly clear. The Illinois economy loses \$4.9 billion a year from the lack of accessible, affordable infant and toddler child care. From the loss of income to working parents, to the negative impact on business productivity, to reductions in the tax base, the cost of failing to build a robust early childhood sector looms large. And these costs only include the care of children under 3 years old, not preschool- or school-aged children.

Businesses also feel the pinch of low child care availability when it comes to hiring and retention. The lack of accessible and affordable child care is keeping parents of young children from fully participating in the workforce and thereby shrinking the talent pool for employers. The struggles of employers and employees alike make it clear that early childhood services form a foundation on which all other business sectors rely.

Not only would a stronger early childhood sector better-support today’s workforce, it is also essential to the development of the workforce of tomorrow. Only about three out of 10 children entering kindergarten are fully prepared for school success in early math, language/literacy, and social-emotional development, according to 2023 Illinois data — the very skills on which both academic and professional achievement depend. Furthermore, disparities remain troublingly pronounced among children of color, low-income households, many rural areas, and other communities of need.

To address these challenges, our nonprofit, nonpartisan, ReadyNation network of 2,000+ business leaders throughout the country — over 270 of them in Illinois — supports greater, research-proven investments in the well-being of children and families. Many of these are reflected in the recent recommendations of an expert, bipartisan commission on early childhood funding. We support its suggestions for improvement in the resources, funding structure, and governance of birth-to-5 programs.

The policy priorities below represent significant, further steps toward recalibrating Illinois’ system of early childhood education and related services to better-meet the needs of children, their families — and, in a very real sense, businesses and our overall state economy.

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We urge you to increase state funding for key early childhood programs in the FY25 state budget – many of which are reflected in the Governor’s proposed, second year of the Smart Start plan. These increases would be another step in the right direction of creating a more robust early childhood care and education sector and help start long-standing structural challenges:

- **Establishment of a new early childhood agency:** The establishment of a new agency is an important step in implementing the recommendations of the bipartisan Early Childhood Funding Commission on which Smart Start plans are based. With the aim to create a more equitable, integrated, and holistic system of service for young children, families, and the providers that serve them, this is also a key move toward addressing the current structural barriers to efficient and effective early childhood services. We request \$13 million to support the initial activities necessary to stand-up the new agency, as the Governor has proposed.
- **Preschool and birth-to-3 services:** We request an increase of \$75 million in the Illinois State Board of Education’s Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG), reflecting the Governor’s and ISBE’s plan. This would support the expansion of preK for 3- and 4-year-olds for an additional 5,000 children and with the hopes of boosting the chronically low compensation of the sector’s workforce. The ECBG also funds Prevention Initiative services for parents of at-risk infants and toddlers — critical ways of laying a skills foundation for youngsters’ success in school and in later life. Other priorities include increasing the number of full-day preK slots and extending Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation services to more kids, families, and educators.
- **Smart Start child care:** An increase of \$122 million for Smart Start child care in the Illinois Department of Human Services (DHS) to continue raising compensation for the chronically underpaid early childhood workforce and for quality support grants to enhance equity and quality in programs, per the Governor’s FY25 proposal.
- **Child care assistance:** An increase of at least \$36.5 million in the IDHS Child Care Assistance Program, supporting increased demand for services for the working parents of children from birth to age 12, statewide, reflecting the Governor’s request. High-quality child care has consistently been shown to improve educational outcomes for children, setting them on a trajectory for school and later career success.
- **Evidence-based home-visiting services:** A combined increase of \$5 million for two DHS-administered programs, Healthy Families Illinois and Maternal Child Home Visiting, per the introduced budget. These provide voluntary “parent coaching” for the families of at-risk children, from birth to age 3, to build resilience and reduce adverse childhood experiences, like abuse and neglect and parental substance abuse (often associated with kids’ own later drug use). These initiatives also connect families with other appropriate services and resources, such as substance abuse treatment.
- **Early Intervention:** An increase of \$40 million for vital therapies for young children with developmental delays, disabilities, and neonatal substance exposure and to help meet the growing DHS caseloads and improve low provider compensation. This compares with the Governor’s \$6 million request — a good start on which we should build further.

In addition to these early childhood priorities, we encourage your support of the following **elementary-through-postsecondary education requests**:

- **Afterschool programs:** Initiatives such as Teen REACH help raise the grades and graduation rates of participating youth while providing them with safe, positive environments during out-of-school hours before most parents are home from work. Increasing Teen REACH in the DHS budget by at least \$6 million would help sustain these programs and address the compensation levels program staff. We similarly should dedicate \$50 million in new funding to community-schools efforts addressing many of these same needs.
- **Postsecondary financial aid:** Monetary Award Program (MAP) grants help low-income students to access college. To continue to meet the needs of qualified college students, we request an additional \$10 million for the MAP grant funding.

Each of these priorities has enjoyed bipartisan support over the years and public support for early childhood services remains strong and widespread.

We hope to work with you to move forward with these wise investments in the well-being of children and families, our workforce and economy, paying important dividends over time. We thank you for your service and dedication to our state.

Sincerely, the undersigned Illinois business leaders and members of ReadyNation –

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