

SUPPORT

SB 3202 (Guzman)

HB 4791 (Hirschauer)

Make Head Start/Early Head Start Eligible for Illinois Smart Start Workforce Grants

Supporting the early childhood workforce that serves Illinois' most diverse and at-risk children and families

The Problem – Illinois' Smart Start Workforce Grants were created to stabilize and strengthen the early childhood workforce by improving compensation, recruitment, retention, and program continuity however, **Head Start is excluded from Smart Start Workforce Grants, despite:**

- ✓ Serving 28,000 of Illinois children and families in high-need communities
- ✓ Employing a large, critical segment of the early childhood workforce (over 9,500)
- ✓ Facing the same workforce shortages, turnover, and recruitment challenges as other eligible programs

This exclusion creates inequity in workforce investment and undermines Illinois' early learning infrastructure.

The Solution – This bill simply makes Head Start programs eligible for Smart Start Workforce Grants.

It does not create a new program — it **corrects an exclusion** so Head Start educators and staff can access the same workforce supports as other early childhood providers. This bill does NOT supplant federal funds.

Why This Matters- The workforce problem Smart Start addresses exists equally in Head Start. Head Start educators are part of the same labor market. Excluding Head Start while raising wages elsewhere causes staff loss, wage disparities, and destabilization of federally funded programs.

- ✓ **Workforce stabilization:** Head Start programs face staffing shortages, turnover, and recruitment challenges. These programs deliver services across early learning, health, mental health, and family well-being while engaging parents as partners every step of the way.
- ✓ **Equity:** Head Start educators serve the state's most at-risk children but lack access to key workforce resources.
- ✓ **Quality improvement:** Workforce grants strengthen training, credentials, and professional growth.
- ✓ **System alignment:** Illinois' early childhood system works best when Head Start is fully integrated, not isolated.

Return on investment: Supporting staff improves child outcomes, family stability, and school readiness.

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Impact on Illinois Families

Head Start serves children in communities with:

- ✓ High poverty
- ✓ Housing insecurity
- ✓ Workforce instability
- ✓ Limited access to child care and early learning services

*Excluding Head Start weakens the very system meant to support families **most in need**.*

What the Bill Does-Adds Head Start/Early Head Start as an eligible provider for Smart Start Workforce Grants

- ✓ Strengthens Illinois' early childhood workforce system
 - ✓ Supports recruitment, retention, and training
 - ✓ Aligns policy with Illinois' equity and access goals
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Bottom Line- If Illinois is serious about strengthening the early childhood workforce and making Illinois the best state to raise a family **Head Start must be included.**

This bill ensures fairness, equity, and smarter investment in the people who care for Illinois' most at-risk, youngest learners.

FACT: If an Illinois child care program receives a Smart Start Workforce Grant they are not allowed to partner with Head Start/Early Head Start. **This has caused Head Start to lose child care partnerships and a loss of federal funds.**

FACT: Over the last ten years IL Head Start/Early Head Start programs are serving 65% less children. **Why? Decreases in federal funding has caused Head Start/Early Head Start programs to reduce enrollment and use these funds to attract, retain and compensate their workforce. This demonstrates the importance of including Head Start in the Smart Start Workforce Grants and supports the critical services that Head Start/Early Head Start provides across the state.**