

Illinois' Infant Toddler Set-Aside:

What It Is and How It Works to Promote School Readiness

Introduction

Illinois is acknowledged as a national leader for funding services to families with infants and toddlers to promote healthy child development and lay the foundation for school success. The Illinois State Board of Education's (ISBE) Early Childhood Education Block Grant funds a continuum of services for children from birth through age five and their families. A portion of the Block Grant funds are set aside exclusively for programs to families with children from birth to age three. Block Grant programs set the stage early, preparing children from birth for academic and social success in school and preparing parents to navigate and actively participate in the formal education system as their children progress into kindergarten and elementary school.

What Is The Infant Toddler Set-Aside? How Was It Created?

In 1985, as part of a school reform effort, the State Prekindergarten (PreK) program for three- to five-year-olds who are at risk of academic failure was enacted into law (Illinois School Code 105 ILCS 5/2-3.71). In 1989, two statewide programs for families with children younger than age three were enacted; the Parental Training program (Illinois School Code 105 ILCS 5/2-3.71a) designed to reach all families with young children and the Prevention Initiative (Illinois School Code 105 ILCS 5/2-3.89), which targeted children at risk of school failure and their families.

In the mid-1990s, state legislators became interested in creating a block grant funding system for a variety of state administered education programs funded through single-program grants. In 1997, the Early Childhood Education Block Grant was enacted (Illinois School Code (105 ILCS 5/1C-2) and became effective in fiscal year 1999. Influenced by new knowledge about how the brain develops and how early experiences beginning at birth affect a child's future, key legislators, advocates, policymakers, and other stakeholders were committed to developing systems of support for children ages birth to five and their families. The Block Grant combined funding for ISBE's early childhood education programs – Prevention Initiative, Parental Training, and Prekindergarten – into one funding stream. It required that a minimum of 8 percent of total funds be used to fund programs for children ages birth to three.

Illinois' infant toddler set-aside borrowed the precedent established by the federal government with Early Head Start, which is funded through a set-aside in the Head Start appropriation. Recognizing the importance of learning during the first three years of life, the Illinois General Assembly increased the infant toddler set-aside to 11 percent of the Early Childhood Education Block Grant in fiscal year 2004.

The Block Grant is funded through state general revenue funds, supporting over 1,000 early education programs statewide serving children under age five. The total Early Childhood Block Grant appropriation for state fiscal year 2006, beginning July 1, 2005, is \$273,305,000, with eleven percent (\$30,063,550) supporting programs for infants, toddlers, and their families.

What Types of Services Are Funded Through the Infant Toddler Set-Aside?

Currently, the Block Grant allows school districts and a broad range of other entities (e.g., Head Start programs, child care providers, family support and parenting programs) to apply for funds. A majority of the more than 250 agencies administering birth-to-three programs are public schools, although a variety of entities are funded, including community-based organizations and local health departments. Services are delivered in a variety of settings, including homes, child care centers, licensed family child care homes, libraries, schools and community agencies. Some programs implement national models such as Parents As Teachers and Healthy Families America while others use locally designed models. Many programs provide essential support for child health and development, including educating parents about child health, growth and development, and facilitating connections with essential health services. Ensuring that children receive vision, hearing, dental and developmental screenings and any follow-up services indicated, as well as regular well-child checkups and immunizations, are essential components of many programs.

Recently, the Illinois General Assembly passed legislation that will require all Block Grant programs serving infants and toddlers to use a research-based program model beginning in fiscal year 2007. Research-based program models have similar fundamental principles that have been demonstrated to improve chances for success in school and life. These principles include:

- High-quality services and referrals that promote physical, social, emotional, cognitive and language development;
- Comprehensive and flexible programs that respond to the varied needs of families;
- Family-centered and community-based programs that focus on the child and the family together in the context of their culture and community;
- Caring, responsive and well-trained staff who have knowledge of infant toddler development and can understand and address parental needs and concerns;
- Programs that support parents as primary nurturers, educators and advocates for their children;
- Programs that provide parents with an opportunity for their own growth and development; and
- Programs that provide smooth transitions into preschool or other appropriate programs and collaborate with other community resources.

How Does the Infant Toddler Set-Aside Work?

Annually, the Illinois State Board of Education releases an Early Childhood Block Grant Request for Proposals (RFP) for new funds that may be available in the upcoming fiscal year, which begins July 1, to support programs serving children from birth to age 3 and to support programs serving children ages 3 to 5. Bidder's conferences are offered and RFP review charts for Birth to 3 and 3 to 5 are also released that describe the criteria that will be used to recommend proposals for funding. Continuing applications for Block Grant programs funded during the previous fiscal years are also made available. The Birth to 3 RFP describes detailed program specifications for services to pregnant women and to infants, toddlers and their families, as well as the required proposal format. The average grant award for individual programs serving at-risk children is \$140,000. ISBE recruits

reviewers from the field of early childhood to review and score applications. Grant awards are typically announced soon after members of the Illinois General Assembly and the Governor approve the new state fiscal year budget.

Applicants proposing services for children and families residing within the City of Chicago limits must apply for Block Grant funds through the Chicago Public Schools, which uses an RFP process similar to that used by the Illinois State Board of Education. State law requires that each fiscal year, 37 percent of the total Early Childhood Block Grant appropriation be allocated to the Chicago Public School District for Birth to 5 programs funded under the Block Grant.

Early Childhood Education Block Grant Statute (Source: Public Act 89-397)
(105 ILCS 5/1C-2) Sec. 1C-2. Block grants. (c) “An Early Childhood Education Block Grant shall be created by combining the following programs: Preschool Education, Parental Training and Prevention Initiative. These funds shall be distributed to school districts and other entities on a competitive basis. Eleven percent of this grant shall be used to fund programs for children ages 0-3.” Authorizing language governing the Illinois State Board of Education’s early education programs can also be found in statute.

Additional Information and Materials

The following documents are available on the Illinois State Board of Education website:

Comprehensive Birth to Three Program Standards for the Early Childhood Block Grant
http://www.isbe.net/earlychi/html/o3_standards.htm.

Early Childhood Education Block Grant Requests for Proposals
http://www.isbe.state.il.us/earlychi/html/block_grant.htm

Early Childhood Education Block Grant Proposal Review Rubric for 0-3 Programs
http://www.isbe.state.il.us/earlychi/pdf/ecbg_rubric_0-3.pdf

Information about programs administered by the Chicago Public Schools can be found on the Community Partnerships website:
http://www.ecechicago.org/pages/home/programs/preschool/Community_Partnership_Programs

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