



Illinois

The Power of a Birth-to-Three Set-Aside

SYNOPSIS

Illinois has been paving the way for the success of their youngest citizens since the 1980s by prioritizing funding for infants, toddlers, and their families with funding set-aside as part of their state pre-K legislation. In Illinois, a robust set of services for infants and toddlers are directly tied to pre-K legislation and funding, ensuring that young children in need are supported by the state's school system even before they reach the classroom. The Illinois State Board of Education's Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) supports the state's pre-K program and sets aside funding for birth-to-three services. By statute, 25 percent of ECBG is reserved for programs that support infants and toddlers through center-based and home visiting programs.¹ Funds are competitively bid and distributed to school districts, social service agencies, nonprofits, and other entities to implement research-based, comprehensive, and intensive prevention services to expecting parents and at-risk families with young children.

THE PURPOSE

The birth-to-three set-aside, funded by the Illinois State Board of Education's Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG), is a unique model that should be considered by all states and communities looking to support infants, toddlers, and their families, and should be of particular interest to those launching or enhancing a pre-K initiative. Programs funded through the set-aside help families prepare their children from birth to age three for success in school and life by providing early, continuous, intensive, and comprehensive evidence-based child development and family support services to young children who are at-risk. The programming includes parent education around development and nurturing of infants and toddlers and case management services to coordinate services that already exist.

While the Illinois birth-to-three set-aside secures much-needed resources for infants and toddlers, additional funding streams are needed to fully support all children during these foundational years.

The Early Childhood Block Grant's (ECBG) has been successful in Illinois because of buy-in from the State Board of Education, which stands behind the notion that pregnancy and the first three years of life fall within their purview. Other states and communities looking to support infants, toddlers, and their families, and/or launching a pre-K initiative, should consider this unique model.

¹ Through its child care system, Illinois also meets or exceeds the Child Care and Development Block Grant Infant/Toddler set-aside requirement. The infant-toddler set-aside in the ECBG is a separate state funding stream.



THE MODEL

For the past three decades in Illinois, the State Board of Education has funded much of the state's services for children from birth to age three through an Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG), which supports both pre-school programs and birth-to-three services. By statute, 25 percent of additional ECBG dollars are reserved for programs that support infants and toddlers through center-based and home visiting programs, ensuring that infants and toddlers in need are supported by the state's school system even before they reach the classroom.

Funding is available on a competitive grant basis to school districts, community-based organizations, and other entities. In 2017, the Illinois State Board of Education reported spending \$65,368,236 on programs that support children from birth to three statewide. Funds are distributed both to enhance infant-toddler center-based programs and to deliver evidence-based home visiting services. The Illinois State Board of Education also contracts with the Ounce of Prevention Fund to provide ongoing training and technical assistance to help grantees work toward aligning their projects with state and federal standards.

Effective July 21, 2016, under Section 1C-2(c) of the School Code, at least 25 percent of any additional ECBG funding over and above the previous year's allocation will be used to fund programs in the birth-to-three set-aside. The State Board is exempted from meeting these minimum percentages when, in a given fiscal year, the amount appropriated for the ECBG is insufficient to increase the birth-to-three set-aside allocation without reducing the amount of the ECBG for existing providers of preschool education programs.

WHY IT WORKS

One element of the Early Childhood Block Grant's (ECBG) success has been the buy-in from the State Board of Education, which stands behind the notion

that pregnancy and the first three years of life fall within their purview. Ireta Gasner, the assistant director of Illinois policy at the Ounce of Prevention Fund, said, "We've had education dollars for birth-to-three programs in Illinois as long as we've had preschool."

Furthermore, maintaining the early childhood funding separately from the school funding formula has allowed for more rigorous oversight and greater consistency across program structures and standards. "Because these funds are competitively bid, we really know how the dollars are being spent," Gasner said.

Parents, partnerships, and advocates—including Ounce of Prevention and Illinois Early Learning Council—are paramount to the ongoing success of the model, as they play a key role in ensuring continued funding by educating policymakers about the need for birth-to-three services and the importance of early childhood development. The Early Learning Council, a public-private partnership that works with The Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development, is a strong force behind early childhood programming, as it helps support a statewide vision for early childhood.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

Serving infants and toddlers most effectively requires state agency leaders to see themselves as part of an entire system. For example, the Department of Human Services also provides similar home visiting services. Though not all states have multiple home visiting programs like Illinois, Gasner warns, "No matter who the funder is, it's important to deliver consistent services and to coordinate monitoring and reporting."

However, having multiple funders can be an advantage. During budget impasses at certain agencies, maintaining birth-to-three services through different funding streams can allow shifts in service burdens to "weather fiscal storms," said Gasner. "That's the advantage of having diversified funding to support similar programming."



State leaders have the following advice for other regions of the country looking to implement a similar model:

- Consider a comprehensive system of support for programs that are implementing services for children from birth to three years and their families. Include monitoring, professional learning, and a system of continuous quality improvement from the beginning.
- Consider the benefits of mental health consultations for all program staff providing services to children birth-to-three-years and their families, including but not limited to supervisors and all direct service providers.
- Build a collaborative spirit among all funders of home visiting and/or center-based services in the state to create a comprehensive and cohesive system.
- Maintain continuity among birth-to-three programs and preschool programs, and build in policies and procedures to ensure seamless transitions.

Ultimately, the entire early childhood landscape in Illinois plays a role in maintaining the birth-to-three set-aside funding model—from policymakers to vocal parents to advocates and service providers. With several decades of a high-functioning early childhood funding model under its belt, the State of Illinois is an informative case study of long-term resources for birth-to-three services.



FURTHER READING

Illinois State Board of Education's website on 0–3 programs:

<https://www.isbe.net/Pages/Birth-to-Age-3-Years.aspx>

Statutory reference for the Infant-Toddler set-aside:

<http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/ilcs/ilcs4.asp?DocName=010500050HArt%2E+1C&ActID=1005&ChapterID=17&SeqStart=4300000&SeqEnd=4900000>

Statutory reference for the Prevention Initiative:

<http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/ilcs/ilcs4.asp?DocName=010500050HArt%2E+2&ActID=1005&ChapterID=17&SeqStart=14200000&SeqEnd=36700000>

"Biennial Report: Fiscal Years 2016 and 2017," Prevention Initiative, Illinois State Board of Education, Division of Early Childhood, July 2018:

<https://www.isbe.net/Documents/FY1617-PI-Biennial-Report.pdf>

"Illinois Prevention Initiative Implementation Manual," Illinois State Board of Education, 2013:

<https://www.isbe.net/documents/manual-intro.pdf>

"A Place to Get Started: Innovation in State Infant and Toddler Policies," ZERO TO THREE, 2016:

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/362-a-place-to-get-started-innovation-in-state-infant-and-toddler-policies>

"Illinois: Prevention Initiative," Center for Law and Social Policy and ZERO TO THREE, 2012:

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED544232.pdf>

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