

Illinois State Board of Education's Birth to Five Funding & Programs: *The Early Childhood Block Grant, Prevention Initiative, and Preschool for All*

HISTORY

Illinois' Early Childhood Block Grant is a birth to five early childhood education funding stream administered by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) that is funded entirely with state general revenue funds. The Block Grant's purpose is to provide early, continuous, intensive, and comprehensive evidence-based child development and family support services to help families prepare their young children under age five for later school success.

The Illinois PreKindergarten Program for Child At Risk of Academic Failure was initiated in 1985. In 1997, the Block Grant was established, which continued the PreKindergarten At-Risk Program for three- and four-year-olds and created a mandatory funding set-aside for infant and toddler programs. These infant-toddler programs are called the Prevention Initiative, and require providers to implement research-based, comprehensive and intensive prevention services for expecting parents and families with children birth to three who are at-risk of academic failure. Research-based models currently funded include center-based services that adhere to Early Head Start program standards, Healthy Families Illinois, Parents as Teachers, and Baby TALK (an Illinois-based model).

In 2006, the PreKindergarten At-Risk Program statute was amended to establish "Preschool for All Children" as the goal of the state prekindergarten program. The passage of Preschool for All makes Illinois the first state in the nation to offer high-quality preschool to all three- and four-year-olds whose families choose to participate. It is important to note that while the shift from PreKindergarten At-Risk to Preschool for All is significant in that it expands the capacity of preschool programs in Illinois, the actual program as it is implemented has not been affected by this technical change. Thus, families whose children are enrolled in a PreKindergarten program that began with At-Risk funding do not need to worry about switching to Preschool for All, because they are the same thing.

PREVENTION INITIATIVE: *Services for At-Risk Infants, Toddlers, and their Families*

The Prevention Initiative funds a variety of research-based programs. These 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;
- Modest caseload sizes for home visitors or high teacher child ratios for center-based programs to ensure staff devote sufficient attention to high-risk children and families;
- 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.

Targeted Population of the Prevention Initiative

The program is intended for children who have been determined at-risk for school failure as indicated by high levels of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, limited-English proficiency, or other need-related indicators, such as the school district's rate of dropouts, retention, truancy, teenage pregnancies and homeless students, high rates of infant mortality, birth trauma, low birth weight or prematurity, and high rates of child abuse and neglect.

PRESCHOOL FOR ALL: *Services for Three- and Four-Year-Olds*

Program Components

Preschool for All is a two-year, part-day program for three- and four-year-olds that also includes training and technical assistance, mental health consultation, efforts to expand supply of certified teachers, monitoring and accountability, and a statewide program evaluation. It also requires programs to include the following seven components:

- *Screening to determine risk status:* Identify and serve Illinois' neediest children first. Screening is conducted on a community-wide basis and implemented with cooperation among programs serving young children operating in the area to be served.
- *Educational Program:* Help preschool children show gains in all developmental areas. The education program must meet the following requirements:
 - a. Align curriculum and instruction with the Illinois Early Learning Standards
 - b. Assess each child in order to shape the educational program to meet their needs
 - c. Address all domains of development
 - d. Provide a language and literacy development program for each child
 - e. Assess student progress over time with measurable outcomes to ensure that the educational program meets the needs of the student
 - f. Advise parents routinely of their child's progress
 - g. Maintain a staff-child ratio of 1 to 10, and no more than 20 children per classroom
 - h. Support transition to kindergarten
- *Parent Education and Involvement:* Engage parents in their children's educational process and to help them gain knowledge and skills in parenting.
- *Community Collaboration:* Ensure that children and families will receive all services needed through a seamless and unduplicated system.
- *Staff Requirements:* All preschool educational program administrators and staff must hold appropriate certification and/or qualifications for the position for which they are hired. All teaching staff providing instruction in Preschool for All must have a Standard Early Childhood Certificate.
- *Professional Development:* Assess staff needs and provide appropriate ongoing professional development activities.
- *Evaluation:* A local evaluation that provides data to the program on the performance of each child/family. An annual evaluation is also conducted on the quality of implementation of these required seven components.

Handout for parents

What are early learning programs?

There are two kinds of early learning programs: Programs serving children birth to three-years-old, and programs serving three- and four-year-olds. These programs operate in a variety of settings, including public and private schools, child care centers, and community and faith-based organizations.

- Birth-to-Three programs help babies' while their brains are growing the most.
 - Home visiting programs provide trained people, "parent coaches," who visit your family's home and bring activities to help your child learn and grow and help you understand how your child is growing.
 - High quality infant-toddler child care programs offer warm, sensitive caregivers who support children and parents.
 - There is no cost to parents for home visiting programs.
- Preschool for All and Head Start prepare 3- and 4-year-olds to succeed in school and in life.
 - Preschool for All and Head Start offer a high quality program in a variety of settings (public and private schools, child care centers, community and faith-based organizations, and other settings).
 - Preschool for All is a free half day preschool program (2.5 hours a day).
 - Parents who need a full-day program can extend their child's day using their own funds or a child care subsidy if they qualify.
 - In a half-day setting, your child can get early learning instruction and still go home to a family caregiver without losing your child care subsidy.

Why should my child participate in early learning programs?

- Infants up to three-years-old can benefit from home-visiting or center-based programs.
 - Babies begin to learn the minute they are born and their brains grow as they learn.
 - If children are read to at an early age, they will learn to recognize and understand letters and numbers and will do much better in school and throughout life. The more words they know the better.
- Three and Four-year-olds who participate in early learning programs – Head Start or Preschool for All in a school, child care or community-based setting – develop skills that help them do well when they get to Kindergarten.
 - Children in Preschool for All or Head Start programs learn to get along with others and how to relate to others, including peers and teachers in their classroom.
 - Children who participate in Preschool for All or Head Start are more likely to succeed in school, stay out of trouble, and make more money over their lifetime.

How can I enroll my child?

- Call (877) 20-CHILD. You will be connected to a child care resource and referral specialist who will help you find services right for you and your child.
 - If you are pregnant or have a child age birth-to-three, ask about home visiting programs or center-based infant-toddler programs.

- If your child will be three or four before September 1, ask for information on Preschool for All programs in your area.
- Preschool and Head Start are half-day programs; there are full-day programs, which include both preschool and high quality child care.
- Start planning early! It is important to look into Preschool for All programs in your area before your child turns three.

Tips for Talking with Parents about Early Learning

Why are early learning experiences important?

- Children begin learning the minute they are born. Language, letter and number skills, and the ability to get along with others develop during a child's earliest years and help them get ready for school.
- Every child can benefit from early educational programs that help children develop these skills that help them do well when they get to school.

Tips:

- ✓ Parents might feel that their child is too young to learn, so it is important to remind them that nurturing their child's potential during these earliest years is a great way to build the skills they need so that they do not start kindergarten behind other children.
- ✓ Likewise, parents might feel that their 3- or 4-year old is not ready for preschool. Remind them that preschool itself helps get children ready for learning - opting out of preschool could keep their children from the very experiences they need to "learn how to learn"
- ✓ Key message: All children are ready, because preschool is meant to help prepare children for future school experiences. With early learning programs, they will enter kindergarten ready to succeed.

What are early learning programs?

- Birth-to-Three programs enrich babies' brains when they are growing the most.
 - Home visiting programs provide trained parent coaches who visit families in their home with child development activities and instruction.
 - High quality infant-toddler child care programs offer warm, sensitive caregivers who support children and parents.
 - There is no cost to families for home visiting programs.
- Preschool for All prepares 3- and 4-year-olds to succeed in school and in life.
 - Preschool for All offers a high quality program in a variety of settings (public and private schools, child care centers, community and faith-based organizations, Head Start and other settings).
 - High quality child care is available in addition to the half day preschool program.
 - There is no cost to families for Preschool for All; however, if full day care is needed, parents will need to use child care subsidies or private pay to cover the cost of child care.

Tips:

- ✓ Home visiting programs typically send parent coaches into the family's home 2 – 4 times a month. Home visits could include child development activities and information/activities for parents.
- ✓ Both types of infant-toddler programs (home visiting and center-based) include strong parental support and involvement, but families may prefer one option over the other based on whether they work outside of the home, their schedule, etc.

- ✓ Remember that criteria for involvement in home visiting programs is still limited to those families who meet some definition of “at risk” – could be income, child delay, prematurity, teen parents, etc.
- ✓ Parents may be reluctant to enroll in early educational programs for fear that they will lose their child care subsidies. Enrolling in Preschool for All services (0-5) will not affect subsidies!
- ✓ They should be encouraged to speak with a specialist to discuss their options, including child care assistance programs.

How can I enroll my child?

- Encourage parents to call (877) 20-CHILD to connect with a child care resource and referral specialist who will help them find the services right for their family.
 - If they are expecting or have a child age birth-to-three, they should ask about home visiting programs or center-based infant-toddler programs.
 - If their child will be three or four before September 1, they should ask for information on Preschool for All programs in the area.

Tips:

- ✓ Talk with families about their needs so they know what to ask for when they call. Preschool for All is a half-day program, but a full-day is available with Preschool for All in combination with high quality child care.
- ✓ There is no cost for the half-day preschool or home visiting programs. Parents who need full day care, though, will still have to use child care subsidies or private payments to pay for child care. They get higher quality – an enhanced program for their kids – if their program includes Preschool for All, but they probably won’t get a tuition break.
- ✓ Encourage families to start planning early! Emphasize the fact that learning begins at birth and participation in Birth-to-Three and preschool programs promote positive development during this critical time.
- ✓ Likewise, encourage families with toddlers to think about preschool *before* their child’s third birthday.