



Illinois State Board of Education

100 North First Street • Springfield, Illinois 62777-0001
www.isbe.net

Darren Reisberg
Chair of the Board

Dr. Carmen I. Ayala
State Superintendent of Education

Frequently Asked Questions for Early Childhood Block Grant Program Grantees on the Transition to In-Person Instruction Last Updated: July 21, 2020

The vast impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the educational landscape in Illinois began March 17, 2020, with the mandatory suspension of in-person instruction.

On May 5, 2020, Governor JB Pritzker announced the Restore Illinois plan, which lays out a public health approach to safely reopen our state. Executive Order 2020-40, filed on June 4, 2020, allowed schools to reopen for in-person instruction, including early childhood programs, in Phase 3. In-person instruction is strongly encouraged in Phase 4; however, it is critical to note that this does not signify a return to pre-pandemic operations. Appropriate social distancing, face coverings, enhanced sanitation measures, and other accommodations will be necessary to ensure the safety of students, staff, and their families.

Additionally, early childhood programs should prepare for a return to remote programming in the event of an outbreak in a school building or a second wave of the virus in the fall.

During Phase 4, Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) guidelines for Illinois schools, including Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) programs located in public and nonpublic schools that serve grades prekindergarten through grade 12, will:

- Require use of appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), including face coverings;
- Prohibit more than 50 individuals from gathering in one space;
- Require social distancing be observed, as much as possible;
- Require that schools conduct symptom screenings and temperature checks or require that individuals self-certify that they are free of symptoms before entering school buildings; and
- Require an increase in schoolwide cleaning and disinfection.

All ECBG program grantees in public and nonpublic schools serving prekindergarten through 12th-grade students must follow these guidelines. ECBG programs housed in facilities licensed by the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) must follow DCFS health and safety requirements.

It is important to note that these requirements are subject to change pursuant to updated public health guidance and changing public health conditions. Program leaders must remain alert for any updates.

The purpose of this document is to serve as a supplemental resource to ECBG program grantees during the preparation for, and transition to, return to in-person instruction. While the topics herein are presented for consideration during preparation for return to in-person instruction, determinations by ECBG program grantees must be in accordance with the framework of the Governor's Office and IDPH.

ECBG program grantees have always been critical links between schools, students, families and communities. Programs offered by grantees can be an important component to the continuing support of students during this time of uncertainty. However, given the current public health emergency, it is likely that delivery of program activities will be impacted. ISBE will make reasonable and fair accommodations that align with the results that are normally expected within the ECBG program goals.

The information in this document is intended to help inform the actions of ECBG program providers during this period. We will update it accordingly as further guidance is received from other state agencies. Please refer to the Illinois State Board of Education's [website](#) or email earlychi@isbe.net for up-to-date information.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Will reducing class sizes impact funding?

ECBG program grantees should strive to serve students in person as well as remotely, if needed, in order to serve the greatest number of students in fiscal year 2021. Programs that are unable to serve their funded enrollment will not receive a reduced allocation. ECBG program grantees must collaborate with their assigned Early Childhood principal consultant to make changes to their grants.

2. Can class sizes be limited in order to eliminate the need to wear face coverings?

All individuals in public and nonpublic schools that serve students in prekindergarten through Grade 12 must wear face coverings at all times, regardless of class sizes, unless a student has a medical contraindication; is younger than 2 years of age; has trouble breathing; or is unconscious, incapacitated, or otherwise unable to remove the cover without assistance. Face coverings must be worn at all times in buildings even when social distancing is maintained. Face coverings do not need to be worn outside if social distance is maintained. It is recommended that students and staff who are not able to wear a face covering due to a medical reason be required to submit a physician's note verifying such a condition.

3. Can face shields be used in lieu of face coverings?

Generally speaking, face shields may not be used in lieu of face coverings. Face shields are not effective protection against coronavirus. There may be a small minority of individuals who have a medical contraindication to using face coverings. If face shields can be tolerated, they might be utilized in these situations, understanding their limitations and the heightened need for strict

adherence to social distancing. ISBE recommends that schools review information, such as a physician's note documenting the medical contraindication, for any individual who is not able to wear a face covering.

Remote instruction or plexiglass dividers, where possible, and increased social distancing should be considered for students who are not able to tolerate either a face covering or a face shield due to sensory or other issues.

4. How many students can schools safely have in an early childhood classroom?

Social distancing must be observed, as much as possible. It is recommended that excess furniture be removed from classrooms to allow for as much space as possible in between learning centers. Reduce the number of students at a learning center at one time, if possible.

Programs should utilize floor markers, carpet squares, signs, and other tools to assist children in maintaining social distance. Programs should also require frequent hand hygiene and increase school-wide cleaning and disinfection. Please view the [ISBE/IDPH Joint Guidance](#) for additional detail.

5. What should programs do if families are not comfortable sending their child to school?

ECBG programs should develop remote options for students who are at higher risk of severe illness or who live with someone who is at higher risk of severe illness if they are exposed to the coronavirus. Options should also be available for parents who are not comfortable with an in-person learning environment. It is recommended that districts include a policy on this in their Remote and Blended Remote Learning Plan. Students receiving remote instruction count toward attendance.

6. Will monitoring procedures be adjusted in FY 2021?

In-person monitoring visits will not occur during fall 2020. Further information regarding virtual monitoring visits will be forthcoming.

7. Can Preschool for All (PFA) classrooms move from half-day to full-day sessions and can Preschool for All Expansion (PFAE) programs move from full-day to half-day sessions?

Half-day models may move to full-day models. Full-day programs may move to half-day models but must provide remote learning opportunities for the time students are not receiving in-person instruction. Additionally, programs that are meeting less than the required hours for PFA or PFAE in person must provide remote learning opportunities for the time students are not receiving in-person instruction. ECBG grantees must collaborate with their assigned Early Childhood principal consultant to make changes to grants.

8. Can we alter daily schedules in a way such that students enrolled in a classroom rotate and do not attend every day in an effort to reduce the number of students in a classroom?

This is a local decision. Programs that are meeting less than the required hours for ECBG must provide remote learning opportunities for the time students are not receiving in-person instruction.

9. Can classrooms be divided, with half of the students with a teacher and the other half being supervised by a paraprofessional and rotate?

No, this would not be allowable. Staff requirements and ratios must be maintained.

10. Are there different guidelines for ECBG program grantees than the joint transition guidance released by IDPH and ISBE?

The IDPH/ISBE Joint Guidance for starting the school year that was released on June 23, 2020, applies to all public and nonpublic schools in Illinois serving prekindergarten through 12th-grade students. School districts that host ECBG programs must follow the requirements included in this document. Licensed child care centers that host ECBG programs must follow DCFS guidelines, including class size.

11. Should PFA/PFAE programs continue to run inclusive programs for students with special needs?

Inclusive programming should continue in FY 2021 if the program was inclusive in FY 2020. Students must receive education in their least restrictive environment, according to federal and state laws. If circumstances prohibit the adherence to the general education class size provisions (70-30 ratio) for special education purposes, districts or other serving entities should apply for a deviation approval. View the [Deviation Application webpage](#).

Deviation Applications must be emailed to DEV@isbe.net for review and approval.

12. Should programs continue to have learning centers and free play?

Programs should continue to use developmentally appropriate practices during this time. Researched-based curriculum should be followed to the greatest extent possible.

13. Are students allowed to share any materials, such as blocks, manipulatives, or pretend play items?

Programs should restrict or discourage the borrowing or sharing of any items. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that electronic devices, toys, books, and other games or learning aids not be shared. It is recommended that items that must be shared or communally used be cleaned after each use -- at a minimum -- and that the individuals perform hand hygiene between use.

14. Are programs allowed to reduce instructional time due to more cleaning and disinfecting that will need to take place between classes?

This is a local decision. Programs that are meeting less than the required hours for ECBG programs must provide remote learning opportunities for the time students are not receiving in-person instruction.

15. Are there certain hours that need to be set for instruction for ECBG classrooms?

Center-based PI and PFA programs should meet a minimum of 2.5 hours, and PFAE programs should meet the equivalent of the time a first-grade class meets. Programs that are meeting less than the required hours for PFA or PFAE must provide remote learning opportunities for the time students are not receiving in-person instruction.

16. Are there recommendations for building relationships with new children and families?

ISBE recommends clear communication with students and families about expectations and protocols for all schools.

17. Should there be a focus on specific standards to address in ECBG classrooms?

The [Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards](#) must be used when planning lessons and curriculum. Programs must create a classroom environment that promotes positive teacher and student relationships.

18. Will portfolio requirements be adjusted?

All portfolio requirements are still in place at this time.

19. Can technology for students be purchased with ECBG grant funds to allow 1:1 devices for the possible return of remote learning?

Devices can be purchased for the purpose of communicating with students and families. Remote learning should include activities that are embedded into a typical day and are not based on technology.

20. How should programs prioritize enrollment if class sizes are reduced?

Programs should add the following priority populations on the weighted eligibility checklist as they prioritize for FY 2021 enrollment.

1. Children with Individualized Education Programs
2. Children experiencing homelessness
3. Youth in Care
4. Children with family income that is 50% below the federal poverty Level

5. Children whose parent or caregiver speaks a language other than English
6. Children whose screening indicated delays in development but do not have a current referral to special education
7. Children of families affected by the COVID-19 pandemic