

OFFICE OF LEGISLATIVE RESEARCH  
PUBLIC ACT SUMMARY



**PA 14-41—sSB 25**  
*Education Committee*  
*Appropriations Committee*

**AN ACT ESTABLISHING THE CONNECTICUT SMART START PROGRAM**

**SUMMARY:** This act requires the Office of Early Childhood (OEC), in consultation with the State Department of Education (SDE), to design and administer the Connecticut Smart Start competitive grant program for local and regional boards of education to establish or expand preschool programs. The program must provide grants for capital and operating expenses. The act requires OEC to give preference to programs serving children from low-income families who live in towns with unmet preschool need. The legislature approved bonding and use of tobacco settlement funds for these grants (see BACKGROUND).

The act also makes changes to PA 14-39, which establishes OEC and requires it to develop and implement the early childhood information system. These changes require the:

1. early childhood information system to track the health, safety, and school readiness of all young children receiving early care and education services in a preschool under the Smart Start program and
2. OEC commissioner to develop a plan to provide access to a preschool program established or expanded under the Smart Start program, which she must submit to the governor by January 1, 2015.

**EFFECTIVE DATE:** July 1, 2014, except for provisions relating to tracking Smart Start students in the early childhood information system, which are effective upon passage.

**SMART START COMPETITIVE GRANT**

The act requires OEC, in consultation with SDE, to design and administer the Connecticut Smart Start competitive grant program for FY 15 through FY 24. The program reimburses local and regional boards of education in the form of capital and operating grants for expenses related to establishing or expanding a preschool program under the board's jurisdiction. Boards must apply to OEC for the grants.

*Types of Grants*

Boards may receive:

1. a capital grant of up to \$75,000 per classroom to renovate an existing public school to accommodate or expand a preschool program and
2. an annual operating expenses grant, either in an amount up to (a) \$5,000 per child served by the program or (b) \$75,000 per classroom, for a period

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of five years, as long as the program continues to meet standards established by the OEC commissioner.

The act prohibits a town from receiving more than \$300,000 in annual operating expense grants. It allows boards to apply for grant renewal after the five-year period expires.

### *Grant Application Process*

Boards may apply for the Smart Start program, individually or cooperatively, beginning July 1, 2014 in a time and manner that the OEC commissioner prescribes. To be eligible for capital and operating grants, an applicant board must:

1. demonstrate a need to establish or expand a preschool program on a form provided by the OEC commissioner, using information from sources such as the preschool experience survey described in PA 14-39;
2. submit a plan for spending grant funds that outlines (a) the amount the board will contribute to the preschool program's operation and (b) how the board will provide preschool access to children otherwise unable to enroll in a program; and
3. submit a letter of support from a local or regional school readiness council, if one is established for the school district.

### *Grant Review and Award Process*

The act requires the OEC commissioner to also consider the following when reviewing boards' Smart Start grant applications:

1. current community capacity for preschool programs;
2. current opportunities for preschool children in the community; and
3. whether the board (a) currently offers a full-day kindergarten program, (b) will cooperate and coordinate with other governmental and community programs to provide services when the preschool program is not in session (presumably before school, after school, and during the summer), or (c) will collaborate with other boards of education in a cooperative arrangement to offer a regional preschool program.

It requires the OEC commissioner, when awarding Smart Start grants, to give priority to boards of education that demonstrate the greatest need for preschool establishment or expansion and whose plan allocates at least (1) 60% of the spaces to children from families at or below 75% of the state median income or (2) 50% of the spaces to children who are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch.

Any preschool program established or expanded using Smart Start grants must:

1. contain a classroom with a certified teacher who (a) has an endorsement in early childhood education or early childhood special education and (b) is employed by the board of education providing the program,
2. maintain a teacher-child ratio and classroom size that complies with the National Association for the Education of Young Children's standards,
3. obtain school readiness accreditation within three years of the program's

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- creation or expansion, and
4. be located in a (a) public school or (b) space maintained by an early care and education and child development program provider under an agreement with a board of education.

### *Grant Status Reports*

Under the act, each board that receives a Smart Start grant (1) must submit an annual status report to OEC about the program's operation, on a form and in a manner prescribed by the OEC commissioner, and (2) may implement a sliding fee scale for services provided to enrolled children.

## BACKGROUND

### *Related Acts*

PA 14-98 authorizes up to \$105 million in bonds for FYs 15 through 24 for the Smart Start grant program: \$15 million for FY 15 and \$10 million for each of the FYs 16 through FY 24. It establishes the Smart Start competitive grant account, a separate, nonlapsing General Fund account, to fund the grant program and directs the bond proceeds to the account.

PA 14-217 transfers \$10 million per year from the Tobacco Settlement Fund to the Smart Start competitive grant account for FYs 16 through 25.

PA 14-39 establishes OEC and requires it to develop and implement the early childhood information system to encourage data-sharing between and among early childhood service providers.

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