



Early childhood facility money up for grabs; up to \$9 million for CPS

By Rebecca Harris | August 31, 2011

On Monday, the Illinois Capital Development Board released application guidelines for the first round of a \$45 million program, believed to be the first of its kind in the nation, that will help nonprofits and school districts build child care and preschool facilities in underserved areas.

By law, Chicago Public Schools must receive one-fifth of the money that is awarded each school year. That could be up to \$9 million altogether or \$5 million of the \$25 million that will be allocated in the program's first funding cycle. Other school districts and nonprofit agencies can also apply for grants of up to \$5 million. Applications are due Nov. 30.

But CPS and any other agency that wants the money will have to use some of their own funding for the construction projects – at least 10 percent of the amount of money they receive from the state. “Since this opportunity was just released a couple of days ago, we will need to assess it internally before making a decision on proceeding,” CPS spokesman Frank Shuftan wrote in an email.

Ginger Ostro, the district's budget director, said at the last Board of Education meeting that the state money was one of several unknown factors in the

district's capital budget. CPS slashed capital funding by \$60 million this year but does not yet have a list of the specific projects it will undertake.

Policy watchers have long speculated that the City of Chicago may pony up cash as well, but any such move has yet to be announced. “We know they're aware of it and they're thinking about it, but we don't know that much more,” says Olivia Roanhorse, a policy associate at the Ounce of Prevention Fund.

She notes that since \$45 million “will go pretty quickly,” some programs may use the money to renovate and expand existing facilities, rather than build new ones.

Contenders will also have to face the question of how they plan to maintain and expand their programs in the face of declining state early-childhood funds.

“This has been in the works for quite a long period of time, before the current budget and economic situation, and I do think there's interest for it,” says Jose Cerda, vice president of public policy at the Illinois Facilities Fund, which



provides lending and real estate consulting for nonprofits. “The time may not be the best for every provider, but it is an overdue opportunity.”

And the construction opportunity may not come again soon, due to the state’s ongoing financial woes.

Cerda notes that Child Care Assistance Program funding has fared better than Preschool for All and Head Start in recent years. Nonprofit child care centers can also compete for funds.

In a report released earlier this month, the Illinois Facilities Fund noted the top 10 counties, municipalities and Chicago community areas in need of more child care and early education slots.

The group hopes its analysis will guide Illinois Capital Development Board’s decisions about which applications to fund.

Among municipalities, Chicago ranked fifth, behind Addison, Aurora, Cicero and Berwyn. The shortage of spots is worst for children under age 3.

The Chicago community area most in need of spots is Brighton Park. It’s followed by Belmont Cragin, Albany Park, Chicago Lawn, South Chicago, New City, West Ridge, Gage Park, Englewood, and Portage Park.

All together, these community areas have fewer than half the child care spots they need. Just 38 percent of eligible children can attend Head Start (compared to 76 percent citywide) and fewer than 30 percent of eligible children have access to Preschool for All (compared to 60 percent across Chicago.)

Many of them are Latino neighborhoods. Sylvia Puente, executive director of the Latino Policy Forum, says it has taken years of work to secure the funding.

A lack of facilities in predominantly Latino areas poses an obstacle to early-childhood education access, she says.

“It’s still years in the making, because it takes years to build a new facility,” she says. “(But) there are groups online who have been waiting for this and who stand ready to apply, so that the facilities can get built.”