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**EARLY LEARNING ILLINOIS PRAISES GOVERNOR AND LEGISLATURE FOR
PUTTING WORKING FAMILIES AND YOUNG CHILDREN FIRST DURING DIFFICULT
BUDGET YEAR**

CHICAGO (June 1, 2005) – Gov. Rod Blagojevich continues to keep his promises to working families and young children with a budget for Fiscal Year 2006 that prioritizes their needs in spite of Illinois’ continuing economic struggles.

The budget, which the Legislature has passed and the Governor now is expected to approve, includes the third \$30 million installment of Governor Blagojevich’s campaign pledge to increase early education funding by \$90 million over three years. The budget also maintains funding for the Child Care Assistance Program, which serves more than 182,000 low-income children across the state.

“Investing in Illinois means investing in our families and in our children,” said Maria Whelan, president of Action for Children, one of the leading organizations in the Early Learning Illinois campaign. “We applaud the governor for having the vision to recognize this.”

During the past three years the Governor has stood steadfast in his commitments to working families and young children. Through his support of the Child Care Assistance Program, eligibility guidelines were finally increased from 1997 levels, allowing more low-income working families to retain or qualify for child care assistance and maintain their employment. Further, by keeping his promise to expand support for the Early Childhood Block Grant, the Governor has ensured that 25,000 more at-risk children ages birth to 5 have access to state-supported pre-K programs and other services.

“These preschool increases represent a significant ‘down payment’ toward ensuring that every child has access to high-quality preschool services – the single greatest investment we can make in the well-being of children and our entire state,” added Jerry Stermer, president of Voices for Illinois Children. “We are ensuring that children enter kindergarten ready to succeed both in school and for the rest of their lives.”

This support is important now more than ever, because the early childhood care and education industry is vital to Illinois' economy. It generates \$2.12 billion in gross receipts each year and employs 56,000 individuals while allowing parents to work.

“The Governor and General Assembly have shown extraordinary leadership and a keen understanding that a child’s education begins long before they enter kindergarten,” said Harriet Meyer, president of the Ounce of Prevention Fund.

The budget also includes the final phase-in of the FamilyCare program, which will provide health insurance for up to 74,000 low-income working parents. The federal government covers 65 percent of the cost for FamilyCare – money that Illinois would otherwise lose if it did not spend it.

Early Learning Illinois aims to ensure that all children are healthy and happy, eager to learn and ready to succeed by the time they enter kindergarten. The campaign is led by Action for Children, Voices for Illinois Children and the Ounce of Prevention Fund, and is endorsed by more than 125 other local, regional and statewide organizations throughout Illinois.

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