

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**YOUNG CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN CHAMPAIGN AREA WOULD
BENEFIT FROM “PRESCHOOL FOR ALL” PROPOSAL**
Bold Initiative Would Provide Voluntary Access to All 3- and 4-Year-Olds

CHAMPAIGN (Feb. 25, 2006) – The “Preschool for All” proposal recently announced by Gov. Rod Blagojevich will help thousands more 3- and 4-year-olds in the Champaign area and across Illinois succeed in school and in life. “Preschool for All” is a proposed five-year initiative to make voluntary preschool available to all 3- and 4-year-olds while expanding opportunities for at-risk infants and toddlers.

Early childhood educators, community leaders and advocates attending the “Early Childhood Education in Illinois: At the Crossroads” forum on Saturday paused to discuss the benefits that “Preschool for All” could bring to the area’s young children. The forum was sponsored by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign’s College of Education and local chapter of Phi Delta Kappa, a professional association of educators. The press conference was organized by Early Learning Illinois, a statewide public awareness campaign anchored by Action for Children, Ounce of Prevention Fund and Voices for Illinois Children.

“We see first hand the impact that high-quality preschool has on our 3- and 4-year-olds: They are ready to learn, and they have the tools to succeed in kindergarten and beyond. ‘Preschool for All’ will further enhance these results,” said Jill Moore, owner and director of the Early Learning Center in Champaign. “‘Preschool for All’ will serve children in a variety of settings, including community-based child care programs.”

The Governor has requested increasing early childhood education funding by \$45 million a year for the next three years so that 32,000 more 3- and 4-year-olds can attend high-quality, voluntary preschool programs. The proposal, based on the recommendations of the Illinois Early Learning Council, would allow communities to provide preschool in a variety of settings, such as schools, child care centers, licensed family child care homes and community-based organizations.

“This plan is the result of more than 200 early childhood leaders and other key stakeholders working diligently to create a viable educational roadmap for our youngest children,” said Margie Wallen, Early Learning Project Manager with Ounce of Prevention Fund. “It is clear, with nearly
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20 percent of funding dedicated to quality enhancements, that the governor and his team paid attention to details and, as a result, the children win.”

“Not only does the ‘Preschool for All’ proposal provide our state’s preschoolers access to a high-quality preschool education experience, it lays the foundation for support to teachers and administrators that will ensure good outcomes for children for many years to come,” said Kay Henderson, Early Childhood Division director with the Illinois State Board of Education.

The Governor’s proposal builds on a \$90 million funding increase for early childhood programs since 2003 that has provided an additional \$500,000 for programs in Champaign County. But there is still a need for more quality preschool, community leaders said.

The “Preschool for All” program would require preschools be staffed by experienced teachers with bachelor’s degrees and early education training, and provide at least 2½ hours a day of programming that builds children’s social, emotional, physical and cognitive skills.

The Early Learning Illinois campaign praised Governor Blagojevich for continuing his commitment to improving the lives of young children and their families. The “Preschool for All” proposal will bring voluntary preschool to many middle-income families who often earn too much to qualify for state-funded programs but too little to afford the cost of private programs. Early Learning Illinois is a statewide advocacy and public awareness campaign led by Action for Children, Ounce of Prevention Fund and Voices for Illinois Children.

“The research about the benefits of preschool is clear: children who have quality early learning experiences do better in school and are more likely to succeed in life,” said Anne Slichter of Champaign, a member of the Voices for Illinois Children Board of Directors. “We need to redefine ‘education’ to include the option of voluntary preschool, and we cannot deny any of our children this important opportunity.”

“Preschool for All” envisions a five-year rollout that would enroll the remaining at-risk 3-year-olds and all 4-year-olds whose parents want them to participate by 2008. Another two-year expansion starting in 2009 would aim to enroll the remaining 3-year-olds. “Preschool for All” also continues to provide 11 percent of the early childhood funding increase for birth-to-3 programs that support parents. The proposal also will help preschool programs meet higher standards, increase the availability of certified teachers and ensure accountability through monitoring and technical assistance.

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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, Ounce of Prevention Fund and Voices for Illinois Children, with strong support from Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Illinois and Chicago Metropolis 2020 and more than 125 other local, regional and statewide organizations throughout Illinois.