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**UNDERSERVED LATINO COMMUNITIES WOULD BENEFIT FROM
GOVERNOR'S "PRESCHOOL FOR ALL" PLAN**

Bold Initiative Would Provide Voluntary Access to All 3- and 4-Year-Olds

CHICAGO (Feb. 17, 2006) – Gov. Rod Blagojevich's "Preschool for All" proposal to improve and expand quality early learning will help thousands more Latino 3- and 4-year-olds succeed in school and in life.

Community leaders, early childhood educators and advocates joined Illinois State Board of Education Chairman Jesse Ruiz and state Rep. Cynthia Soto at Erie Neighborhood House in Chicago on Friday to discuss the benefits that "Preschool for All" could bring to the area's young children.

"We see the growing need for preschool education, particularly with Latino and middle-class families. The Governor's 'Preschool for All' program would help meet that need and be a great benefit to Illinois families," Ruiz said.

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.

"We see first-hand the impact high-quality and nationally accredited preschool has on three- and four-year olds: They are ready to learn, and they have the tools to succeed in kindergarten and beyond," said Ricardo Estrada, executive director of Chicago's Erie Neighborhood House. "Preschool is more than shapes and numbers; together with parents we are beginning to strengthen our greatest assets – our children – by building critical social, emotional and critical thinking skills and abilities."

"My son has the chance to have a brighter future; because of his experience in Erie's preschool program, he will be ready for kindergarten. As a working mom, preschool gives me the peace of mind that my child is learning and growing so that I can go to work and support our family," said Erie House parent Evelyn Corona

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Census data shows that while a great majority of Latino families in Illinois qualify for pre-kindergarten, only 35.6 percent participate in preschool, that is far below the 52.5 percent state average. At Erie House, their preschool program served 278 children last year. Currently, Erie house has waiting lists for many of their programs including 145 children for preschool.

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 Jerry Stermer, president of Voices for Illinois Children. “We need to redefine ‘education’ to include the option of voluntary preschool, and we cannot deny any of our children this important opportunity.”

“Preschool will make a difference that will last a lifetime,” said Maria Whelan, president of Illinois Action for Children. “The Governor builds on successes in Illinois that have given our children options, opportunities and access through early care and education. This is further evidence that he understands the value of making children and their future a priority.”

“This plan is the result of more than 200 early childhood professionals working diligently to create a viable educational roadmap for our youngest children,” said Harriet Meyer, president of Ounce of Prevention Fund. “It is clear, with nearly 20 percent of funding dedicated to quality enhancements, the governor and his team paid attention to details and, as a result, the children win.”

“‘Preschool for All’ will help ensure Illinois’ children have the ability to enter kindergarten with a strong foundation for learning,” said Sen. Carol Ronen, D-Chicago. “High-quality early education is a crucial step toward making sure children have the early literacy opportunities that can give them the skills to succeed.”

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Illinois has been recognized as a national leader in the preschool movement for the recent funding increases made by the Governor and Legislature during difficult budget times. Three other states – Florida, Georgia and Oklahoma – provide preschool to all 4-year-olds, but Illinois will be the only state to also provide voluntary access to all 3-year-olds.

“Children and families for generations to come will enjoy the benefits of Governor Blagojevich’s far-sighted vision for Illinois,” said Libby Doggett, Ph.D., executive director of Pre-K Now. “His leadership will ensure the success of the Pre-K-through-12 system in this state.”

The proposal builds upon a recent \$90 million funding increase for early childhood education approved by the Governor and Legislature that has enrolled another 25,000 young children at risk of school failure since 2003. “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.

“Nothing is more important to parents than their children. And nothing is more important to a child’s future than getting a good education. And that’s where preschool comes in,” Blagojevich said in a press release.

“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.

Erie Neighborhood House promotes a just and inclusive society by strengthening low-income, primarily Latino families through skill-building, access to critical resources, advocacy and collaborative action. Primarily operating from two sites in Chicago's West Town and now offering services from Chicago's Humboldt Park and Little Village, Erie's community-based educational programs help over 4,000 participants through nationally accredited preschool and after-school care; a home day care network for infants and toddlers; academic mentoring, personal development, creative and recreational opportunities for at-risk teens; adult basic education classes, English as a Second Language, GED preparation, citizenship services, and leadership development; community-based technology instruction for all ages; and emergency food and referral services.