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**METRO EAST FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES WOULD BENEFIT FROM  
GOVERNOR'S "PRESCHOOL FOR ALL" PLAN**

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

EAST ST. LOUIS (Feb. 23, 2006) – Gov. Rod Blagojevich's "Preschool for All" proposal to improve and expand quality early learning will help thousands more 3- and 4-year-olds in East St. Louis and the Metro East area succeed in school and in life.

Educators, state and community leaders, advocates and parents visited the Lessie Bates Davis Neighborhood House on Thursday to discuss the benefits that "Preschool for All" could bring to the area's young children.

"The research 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."

"It's imperative we leave no stone unturned in our quest to place our children on the fast track to success, and the "Preschool for All" initiative is certainly in line with that mindset," said East St. Louis School District 189 Superintendent of Schools Dr. Theresa Saunders. "We feel very comfortable in supporting this measure and encourage the community to lend its voice to this most worthwhile effort that stands to benefit generations of young people."

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 that high-quality early learning has on our 3- and 4-year-olds: They are ready to learn, and they have the tools to succeed in kindergarten and beyond," said William Kreeb, executive director of Lessie Bates Davis Neighborhood House.

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“One of the benefits of ‘Preschool for All’ is that it serves children in a variety of settings, including community-based child care programs.”

“Children’s access to quality early childhood education can be a powerful strategy to strengthen education and close the achievement gap,” said Janice Moenster, a member of the Illinois Early Learning Council and professional development advisor at Children’s Home and Aid Society of Illinois in Granite City. “Research evidence is overwhelming that early childhood education pays financial dividends by reducing future costs for special education and other forms of remediation. In fact, children who participate in high-quality early childhood programs make better progress in language, math and social skills in comparison to their peers who did not have the opportunity. Studies also show that the earlier the interventions begin and the longer that children participate, the better the outcomes.”

The proposal builds on a \$90 million funding increase for early childhood programs since 2003 that has provided an additional \$1.5 million for St. Clair County programs. 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.

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

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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.*

*Lessie Bates Davis Neighborhood House is a United Methodist Community Center that provides a range of programs and services to over 3,500 children, youth, families, individuals and elderly residents are served each year. The agency’s programs are aimed at strengthening families and creating a better quality of life for young and old alike.*