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ILLINOIS MAKES HISTORY

First State to Approve Plans to Provide Voluntary, High-Quality Preschool for All

CHICAGO (May 5, 2006) – Lawmakers have passed legislation to make Illinois the first state in the nation with the goal of offering voluntary, high-quality preschool to all 3- and 4-year-olds. Young children who are at risk of school failure are the first priority as Preschool for All expansion begins this fall, followed by middle-income children and, finally, all other children whose parents want them to participate.

The fiscal year 2007 state budget includes \$45 million in new funding for early childhood education, for total spending of \$318 million. Preschool for All also continues to set aside 11 percent of early childhood funding for birth-to-3 programs targeting at-risk families. High-quality early learning helps children succeed in school and in life, and benefits the entire state by strengthening communities and the future workforce.

Preschool for All passed both chambers with strong bipartisan support – a unanimous vote of 105-0 in the House and a 47-10-1 vote in the Senate. Senate Bill 1497, House Floor Amendment 3 states that funding “shall be distributed to achieve a goal of ‘Preschool for All Children’ for the benefit of all children whose families choose to participate in the program.” Priority is given to serving all at-risk children before expanding to children whose families make less than four times the federal poverty level, or \$80,000 for a family of four. Many of these middle-income families earn too much to qualify for state-funded programs but too little to afford the cost of high-quality private programs. Other children will be eligible once the first groups have been served.

Illinois is recognized as a national leader in the preschool movement for funding increases supported 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 is the first and only state whose policy includes offering voluntary access to all 3-year-olds.

“Today, Illinois has established as a matter of substantive policy that all children deserve a quality early learning experience,” said Harriet Meyer, president of Ounce of Prevention

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Fund and co-chair of the Illinois Early Learning Council. “Governor Blagojevich and the General Assembly have backed this up with meaningful funding. We will continue to focus on young children until every child is served, but today represents a historical victory.”

“Bi-partisan leadership has been central to our success,” continued Maria Whelan, president of Illinois Action for Children. “It demonstrates that at the end of the day, all children matter.”

“Preschool for All reflects the science that demonstrates success in education is dependent on what happens during children’s earliest years,” said Jerry Stermer, president of Voices for Illinois Children. “Our elected leaders agree on the goal of providing quality preschool for all young children, and we look forward to continuing this discussion with policymakers, educators and parents.”

Preschool for All will provide preschool in a variety of settings, including child care centers, licensed family child care homes, community-based organizations and schools. Preschools will 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. Preschool for All is based on the recommendations of the Illinois Early Learning Council.

Preschool for All aims to ensure that, when fully implemented, 190,000 children in Illinois have access to voluntary, high-quality preschool. This estimate includes children who are already served in existing state PreKindergarten, Head Start and PreK Special Education programs.

Preschool for All builds upon the \$90 million increase for early childhood education over the past three years which was approved by the Governor and Legislature. Since that time, an additional 25,000 young children at risk of school failure have access to preschool. In his February Budget Address, the Governor called for increased funding totaling \$135 million over the next three years to expand access and improve quality even more.

This FY07 funding increase will help preschool programs meet higher standards, increase the availability of certified teachers and ensure accountability through monitoring, technical assistance and program evaluation.

The Early Learning Illinois campaign praised the Governor and legislators for their commitment to improving the lives of young children and their families. 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, with support from Chicago Metropolitan 2020, Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Illinois and more than 125 local, regional and statewide organizations.

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“We need every weapon in the fight against crime,” said Mark Donahue, president of the Chicago Fraternal Order of Police. “I’d rather see kids end up in caps and gowns than in handcuffs, and the research shows that preschool is a penny-wise and pound-smart way to start kids on the right path in life.”

“High-quality early childhood education is one of the best investments we can make,” said Adele Simmons, vice chair and senior executive of Chicago Metropolis 2020. “Research has proven that quality preschool programs reduce future social costs and lead to a better skilled workforce. Every dollar invested saves at least \$7 in future public expenditures for courts, prisons, remedial education and social programs. And the benefits to the K-12 education system are huge, because children arrive ready to learn.”

Preschool for All takes effect July 1 and will be administered by the Illinois State Board of Education. A request for proposals will be released shortly so that programs can apply for expansion funding that will be available next fall.

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, Chicago Metropolis 2020 and more than 125 other local, regional and statewide organizations throughout Illinois. For more information, visit www.earlylearningillinois.org.

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