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**LEADERSHIP MATTERS: ILLINOIS FINDS A WAY TO EXPAND EARLY CHILDHOOD**  
National Report Recognizes Governor Blagojevich as a “Pre-K Budget Hero”

CHICAGO (April 21, 2005) – A national report on gubernatorial leadership in early childhood education is calling Gov. Rod Blagojevich a “Pre-K budget hero” for continuing his push for preschool expansion despite large budget deficits. “Leadership Matters: Governors’ FY 2006 Pre-K Proposals” was released today by Pre-K Now, a national organization working to ensure high-quality early childhood education is available in all 50 states. The report is available at [www.earlylearningillinois.org](http://www.earlylearningillinois.org).

Blagojevich has proposed a \$30 million increase to the state’s Early Childhood Block Grant, despite an estimated \$1.1 billion budget deficit. Governors from two other states – Connecticut and Washington – were also recognized for requesting expanded preschool funding despite budget challenges. The report named five other governors as “new leaders” for expanding their state’s early learning programs.

The Pre-K Now report was praised by leaders from Early Learning Illinois, a statewide advocacy campaign working to expand high-quality early learning. In the previous two years, Gov. Blagojevich and the Illinois General Assembly have delivered \$60 million in new dollars for early childhood – a 33 percent increase from the prior administration. The governor’s proposed FY 2006 increase is the third installment of a \$90 million commitment to expand the Early Childhood Block Grant for at-risk children. These dollars provide preschool to approximately 25,000 3- and 4-year-olds who were not being served.

“Governor Blagojevich richly deserves this recognition, as do the legislators who have fought for young children in difficult budgetary times,” said Harriet Meyer, president of the Ounce of Prevention Fund. “We look forward to working with them to ensure the \$30 million increase for fiscal year 2006 is approved. Expanding the block grant is an important step towards the goal of offering high-quality preschool to all Illinois children.”

The report also praised Illinois’ “innovative state set-aside” for infants and toddlers and their families. Eleven cents of every block grant dollar are directed to programs that serve the state’s youngest at-risk children. While research consistently shows that learning

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begins at birth, Illinois is the only state in the nation to institutionalize a set-aside to support children starting in the first days of life.

“Providing young children with quality early learning experiences is critical and gives them the foundation they need to succeed in school and in life,” said Jerry Stermer, president of Voices for Illinois Children. “Without opportunities for early learning, too many children start school behind their peers and never catch up. We need to make sure all children are healthy, eager to learn and ready to succeed by the time they enter school.”

“Governor Blagojevich and our legislators have demonstrated that they truly care about children and are willing to invest in what matters—their early care and education,” continued Maria Whelan, president of Action for Children. “By investing in them now, they are ensuring a better future, saving money and most importantly, making a difference in the lives of working families and their children.”

Early Learning Illinois is a joint project of Action for Children, Ounce of Prevention Fund and Voices for Illinois Children.

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