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## **Gov. Blagojevich unveils landmark plan to give every 3- and 4-year-old in Illinois access to preschool**

Preschool for All would provide high-quality preschool education to nearly 190,000 Illinois children

Illinois would become the only state in the nation to offer preschool to all 3- and 4-year-olds

[FEB. 13, 2006] **SPRINGFIELD** -- Capping three years of unwavering commitment to early childhood education, Gov. Blagojevich on Friday unveiled the cornerstone of his upcoming fiscal 2007 budget, Preschool for All, which would allow every 3- and 4-year-old in Illinois to attend high-quality preschool. Preschool for All would guarantee that nearly 190,000 children in Illinois have the chance to attend preschool and would make Illinois the only state in the nation to offer preschool to every 3- and 4-year-old child. If the General Assembly passes the governor's proposal, Illinois would also become the only state in the nation where every child has access to a doctor and a teacher, thanks to the governor's All Kids and Preschool for All programs.

"Nothing is more important to parents than their children, and nothing is more important to a child's future than getting a good education," Blagojevich said. "And that's where preschool comes in. We now provide preschool to almost all at-risk 4-year-olds in the state. But preschool makes a big difference for middle-class families as well -- families who work hard, pay their taxes and play by the rules. These are the same families whose children don't have health care, because they fall through the cracks. They make too much money to qualify for help from the state and not enough to afford health care or preschool for their children. They deserve our help."

Preschool for All would allow every community to offer high-quality preschool in a variety of settings, including public and private schools, child care centers and licensed family child care homes, private preschools, park districts, faith-based organizations, and other community-based agencies. The program requires that preschools be staffed by experienced teachers who hold bachelor's degrees and specialized training in early education and that the preschools provide at least 2 1/2 hours per day of high-quality programming designed to foster all of the skills -- social, emotional, physical and cognitive -- that all young children need to achieve success in school and later in life.

In the spring of 2003, Blagojevich and members of the General Assembly created the Illinois Early Learning Council to find a way to meet the early learning needs of all children.

Preschool for All, which would guarantee that all Illinois children have the chance to attend preschool, would reach those children whose families have the hardest time paying for quality

pre-kindergarten services. In Illinois, the average annual cost of private early learning programs for 3- and 4-year-olds is \$5,200, and the cost for two children can exceed \$10,400 annually -- the salary of a minimum-wage earner.

By providing increases of \$45 million in each of the next three years, Illinois will give a total of 32,000 more kids the opportunity to attend preschool. After three years, every 4-year-old will be covered, plus more than 55,000 3-year-olds. In years four and five of the rollout, service will be extended to all remaining interested 3-year-olds.

"Nearly 20 percent of the proposed funding is devoted to quality enhancements," said Harriet Meyer, Early Learning Council co-chair and Ounce of Prevention Fund president. "The governor listened to the council's sound recommendations and continues to demonstrate visionary leadership. As a result, our youngest children win."

"Thousands of children across Illinois now have a chance that will make a difference for a lifetime," said Maria Whelan, president and chief executive officer of Action for Children. "Access to preschool makes a difference. The governor has been a strong supporter of children, and this important step is further evidence of that. We appreciate his vision, his commitment, his willingness to continue to make children and their future a priority."

"The Illinois State Board of Education is grateful that Governor Blagojevich has not only accepted our preschool education funding proposal, but in fact has actually exceeded the funding level we recommended, in his own proposed budget," said Illinois State Board of Education Chairman Jesse Ruiz. "We appreciate Governor Blagojevich continuing to work with the State Board of Education to make Illinois a nationally recognized leader in early childhood education and for providing early learning opportunities for a greater number of Illinois kids."

"Preschool for All is exactly what parents all over Illinois have been wanting for some time," said Jerome Stermer, president of Voices for Illinois Children. "Parents want the option of enrolling their children in high-quality programs that help children with social and emotional development within a rich environment of cognitive skill building. Wisely, the governor's plan builds on our existing successes in Illinois, offering options for preschool in schools and child care programs alike."

Countless studies demonstrate the benefits of early learning in preschool. Children who begin reading at age 3 or 4 do better throughout their academic careers. Children who received high-quality early education are 20 percent more likely to complete high school and 41 percent less likely to be placed in special education. In addition, children who received high-quality early education are 42 percent less likely to be arrested as a juvenile for a violent offense, will have half as many criminal arrests, and have higher earnings and property wealth as an adult.

Investments in early childhood education also pay enormous economic dividends in the long term. Based on certain economic returns like increased earning potential, decreased dependency on social services and on the justice system, it is estimated that society receives \$7.14 for every \$1 spent on early child care programs. That means the \$90 million Blagojevich has invested over the last two years would yield at least \$643 million in savings over the lifetime of those children.

A newer study released in November 2004 found an even higher rate of return -- showing a savings of more than \$17 for every \$1 invested.

Despite unprecedented budget deficits, Blagojevich has made early childhood education a top priority, fulfilling his promise to increase investments in the Early Childhood Block Grant by \$90 million over three years. His commitment to expanding early childhood education continues to gain national attention. In the spring of 2005, a report released by Pre-K Now called Blagojevich a "Pre-K budget hero" for continuing his push for preschool expansion despite difficult financial conditions. And in November 2004, the National Institute for Early Education Research released its 2004 State Pre-School Yearbook, which ranked Illinois as one of the top three states for program quality. Illinois received praise for its teacher training as one of only 13 states to require certification for its early childhood teachers.

In addition to his efforts in expanding access to early childhood education, Blagojevich has also been committed to expanding access to health care for children in Illinois. In November, he signed a new law creating the All Kids program, which provides all Illinois children with access to affordable, comprehensive health insurance.

[News release from the governor's office]