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**YOUNG CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN THE PEORIA AREA WOULD
BENEFIT FROM “PRESCHOOL FOR ALL” PROPOSAL**
Bold Initiative Would Provide Voluntary Access to All 3- and 4-Year-Olds

PEORIA (March 17, 2006) – The “Preschool for All” proposal recently announced by Gov. Rod Blagojevich will help thousands more 3- and 4-year-olds in the Peoria area and across Illinois succeed in school and in life. “Preschool for All” is a proposed five-year initiative to make voluntary preschool available to all 3- and 4-year-olds while expanding opportunities for at-risk infants and toddlers.

Illinois State Board of Education Chairman Jesse Ruiz joined educators, early childhood teachers, community leaders and advocates at the Peoria County Teachers’ Institute on Friday to discuss the benefits that “Preschool for All” could bring to the area’s young children. The Educators’ Day conference was sponsored by Peoria Regional Office of Education, Peoria County Bright Futures, Illinois Central College Child Care Connection, PCCEO Head Start, Peoria Public School District 150, Illinois Association for the Education of Young Children, Peoria’s Children and Early Learning Experience at Rogy’s. The press conference was organized by Early Learning Illinois, a statewide public awareness campaign anchored by Action for Children, Ounce of Prevention Fund and Voices for Illinois Children.

“We see the growing need for preschool education, particularly with 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.

“If we are going to level our schools’ desktops, we are going to have to make a commitment to universal early childhood education,” said Dr. Gerald Brookhart, superintendent of the Peoria Regional Office of Education. “If not now, when? If not Illinois, where? ‘Preschool for All’ is a great first step.”

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.

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“As a lifelong educator, I know learning begins at birth,” said Charles Fabish, Success by Six coordinator for the Heart of Illinois United Way. “Over 80 percent of brain growth happens the first few years of life – if you look at it on a graph, the line showing brain development is practically vertical for the first few years. But we traditionally haven’t devoted many public resources during this critical period of rapid intellectual development. ‘Preschool for All’ is a practical step toward addressing this imbalance.”

“Brain research tells us that the most crucial time for development in children occurs in the early years prior to kindergarten,” said Jodi Walschaert, lead teacher at the Valeska Hinton Early Childhood Education Center. “Quality preschool experiences can provide children with the cognitive skills as well as the social and emotional skills necessary for ensuring future school success.”

The Governor’s proposal builds on a \$90 million funding increase for early childhood programs since 2003 that has provided an additional \$1.6 million for programs in Peoria County. But there is still a need for more quality preschool, community leaders said.

“Preschool will make a difference that will last a lifetime,” said Sessy Nyman, vice president of public policy and government relations at 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 leaders and other key stakeholders working diligently to create a viable educational roadmap for our youngest children,” said Margie Wallen, Early Learning Project Manager with Ounce of Prevention Fund. “With the inclusion of quality enhancements, it is clear that the governor and his team paid attention to details and, as a result, the children win.”

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.

“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. “Preschool for All” also continues to provide 11 percent of the early childhood funding increase for birth-to-3 programs

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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.