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GOVERNOR HIGHLIGHTS "DRAMATIC" PRESCHOOL EXPANSION, PROMISES MAJOR NEW INITIATIVE IN WEEKS AHEAD

CHICAGO (January 18, 2006) During his State-of-the-State address today, Governor Rod Blagojevich cited past increases to early childhood education as a major accomplishment and made it clear that young children will continue to be a top priority. The governor's speech made reference to a forthcoming announcement of a major new early learning initiative. His remarks were well received by leaders of Early Learning Illinois, a statewide campaign to promote voluntary preschool for all families who want it. Anchored by Action for Children, Ounce of Prevention Fund and Voices for Illinois Children, Early Learning Illinois supports policies that advance access to quality early learning for children birth to five.

"We have made early childhood education a priority and we have put our money where our mouth is," said Governor Blagojevich. "We've expanded funding for preschool by fifty percent, given 25,000 more three and four year olds a chance to start school early, and Illinois is now ranked among the top three states in the nation for early childhood education."

"Young children have benefited from the governor's aggressive investment strategy and strong support for early learning on both sides of the aisle," said Harriet Meyer, president of the Ounce of Prevention Fund. "It is imperative that lawmakers continue to view children as our best investment with the greatest return."

Over the past three years, Illinois has expanded the Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) by \$90 million, making preschool available to 25,000 more at-risk 3-and 4-year-olds. Illinois is also nationally recognized for its model of directing eleven cents of every ECBG dollar to programs for at-risk infants and toddlers. Illinois has been recognized by PreK Now, a national organization that cited Illinois' progress and gubernatorial and legislative leadership in their report *Votes Count: Legislative Action on PreK in FY 2006*.

"Our work is not done," continued Maria Whelan, president of Action for Children. "Early education makes a significant difference in the lives of children and their families, especially those most at risk. We have momentum and we have to continue in this very important work."

Despite progress, there are still some 100,000 children who do not yet have access to an enhanced preschool opportunity. Moderate- and low-income working families are suffering most. Their children fall between the cracks, because their parents make too much money for state and federal programs and they cannot afford a quality private program.

"Research indicates that children's minds grow most rapidly during their earliest years," said Voices for Illinois Children President Jerry Stermer, "The success that starts with a high-quality preschool experience continues through the school years and beyond – for families, the workforce and communities of tomorrow."

About Early Learning Illinois

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, Chicago Metropolitan 2020 and over 125 other local, regional and statewide organizations throughout Illinois.

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