



BUILDING BETTER LIVES

## **Economic recovery hinges on maintaining investments in children's learning**

*Early childhood, mental health & bilingual services remain critical*

*Testimony on FY12 priorities for the Illinois State Board of Education's Finance & Audit Committee*

*November 3, 2010 – Mundelein*

Strengthening the jobs picture and our economic recovery requires that we think and act on many levels in public policy. We must be able to connect the dots among factors local, state and national, between theory and practice, between our actions in the short-term and their effect over the long-term. Thus, Voices for Illinois Children appreciates this opportunity to join with the Illinois State Board of Education and other Illinoisans in thinking, very deliberately, about our priorities for the education budget in FY2012 – and how we can buttress rather than frustrate our collective efforts at economic recovery.

Voices is a 23-year-old nonpartisan, nonprofit, statewide group of children's advocates who consider children's well-being our top priority and our bottom line. We pursue public policy solutions to the challenges facing children of all ages, in every issue area of concern to them and their families: education, health, economic security and the fiscal well-being of our entire state.

That's why we're particularly troubled by statistics like these that we recently received from ISBE: This fall, 40 Illinois school districts and community-based providers have closed entire prekindergarten programs. These moves have displaced more than 2,600 young children – from East Dubuque in the northwest to Enfield in the southeast – from affordable opportunities to enter school better-prepared for success, opportunities they might ever again receive. Parents have lost valuable work supports that helped them hang onto their jobs, safe in the knowledge their kids had a reliable place to stay and to learn while mom and dad worked. And based on enrollment figures, we believe about 65 teachers have lost their jobs from these programs.

These closings result largely from the inability of schools and community-based providers – small, local businesses – to continue relying upon months-overdue state payments. Payments that last year were slashed by 10 percent. These preK closure figures don't include other, non-teaching school professionals who've been pushed out of work by closures. They don't count dozens more birth-to-3 programs that also have closed, taking more services from at-risk infants and toddlers and jobs from their providers. And they don't even count the effects of schools and providers who, instead of shutting-down entirely, simply eliminated a classroom or two and displaced still other children, teachers and other professionals.

In addition to the near-term results of these closures, there are consequences to be felt later – down the road, when research shows a disproportional number of those students will struggle academically, require more expensive and remedial help, drop out of school, fail to find gainful employment and fall short of helping Illinois' workforce to grow strong and our communities to prosper.

“If we don't invest in our education and infrastructure – and I'm talking about early childhood education all the way through higher education – we might as well quit,” former U.S. Labor Secretary Robert Reich said at an economic summit in Chicago last month. He drew a clear line between the strength of the education we provide children today and the success of our economic-recovery efforts tomorrow. Yet, he noted, policymakers too frequently try to balance budgets by cutting-back on such vital priorities as

education. “Exactly the opposite of what we should be doing – precisely the opposite,” lamented Reich, who was named one of the nation’s most influential business thinkers by the Wall Street Journal in 2008.

Here are three examples of ISBE priorities that Voices knows to reflect the wisest possible investments of state resources, for the good of kids and our economy:

- **The Early Childhood Block Grant** – As previously mentioned, this funding for preschool and infant/toddler developmental services was cut 10 percent in FY10, and delayed payments have forced still more local decisions to curtail or end programs. In answer to one of ISBE’s budget-hearings question, we do believe that early childhood, General State Aid and mandated categoricals should remain top priorities – yet we’re also concerned about failing to give appropriate, priority attention to a number of other vital services and programs on which kids depend.
- **The Illinois Children’s Mental Health Partnership** – In the past two years, the state has slashed about \$1.4 million – about 46 percent – of ISBE funding for these initiatives. This has hurt our progress toward better prevention, early intervention and treatment services, both inside and outside schools, the efforts that are needed to strengthen kids’ social and emotional well-being.
- **Bilingual education** – Two years’ worth of cuts here total about \$12.3 million, or more than 16 percent, despite the needs of an ever-growing population of English Language Learners, who need basic language services to thrive academically and socially. (We do appreciate ISBE’s work to minimize the effect of these and many other cuts.)

As you prepare a budget request for FY12, we ask that you keep these and other critical education supports in mind. We ask that you help to:

- **Preserve these services from further budget cuts;**
- **Restore the harmful cuts they already have sustained in recent years; and**
- **Continue to work toward fulfilling the many unmet needs of kids and families that these programs represent, in as timely a manner as possible.**

We appreciate the magnitude of such recommendations. Indeed, Voices’ in-house Budget & Tax Policy Initiative forecasts a revenue shortfall of at least \$16 billion for FY12. Clearly, our state must raise far greater revenues to protect and stabilize vital state services.

As many of you know, Voices has long supported a responsible framework for revenue reform: a general tax increase coupled with greater use of tax credits and exemptions to help protect low- and middle-income, working families. Such moves would add badly needed balance to our budget approach, which currently relies too heavily on cuts, borrowing and delays.

In addition to pursuing further reforms and strategic spending restraints, we absolutely must produce more adequate revenue to help minimize cuts and speed-up delayed payments – the most important answer to another of ISBE’s budget-hearings question, about how to deal with such lengthy delays. And significant new revenues would help us – once the economy improves – to resume building upon our successes in ways that help more children to do better.

We’ll continue work to raise more adequate revenues for crucially important needs. We appreciate the support you have voiced for these efforts in the past, and any further backing you can provide. And we thank ISBE for providing consistent, important leadership on behalf of children’s learning and development, through wise investments in early learning and so many other vital priorities.