



BUILDING BETTER LIVES

CHILDREN AS PRIORITIES:

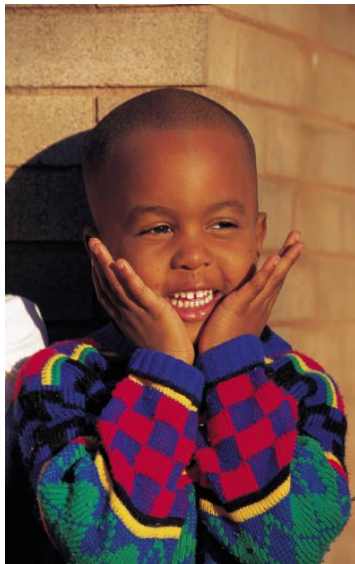
An issues briefing for voters & candidates in state elections

Summer/Fall 2010

Elections are a crucial time for taking stock of our collective response to children's needs and for reaffirming or adjusting course to ensure we're doing the best we can to fulfill them. Now is the time for strong policy answers to the challenges facing families – and for the solid leadership necessary to pursue those solutions.

Even in the toughest of times, we are far from powerless. Indeed, over the years, we Illinoisans have proven ourselves to be national leaders on several important policy fronts – from improving early learning opportunities for young children to strengthening systems supporting the social and emotional development of our youth, all the way up to adulthood. Now, as resources are threatened, we must guard against losing further ground on those significant gains and redouble our efforts in all areas to ensure the well-being of children who represent our state's future.

This is particularly important in the current fiscal atmosphere, a time when struggling families need us to step-up, more than ever. Indeed, few Illinoisans have gone unscathed by the recession that's gripped the nation since late 2008. From the effects of unemployment to housing foreclosures to the ongoing curtailment of essential public services, nearly everyone has been affected, directly or indirectly. Yet few are suffering more than children who – in many cases – were hurting even before the onset of the economic downturn.



While poverty rates have risen among all Illinoisans, they're disproportionately spiking among children, as shown in the recent Voices for Illinois Children report, *Illinois Kids Count 2010: Children and Families in a Time of Economic Crisis*. That trend began well before the recession. According to projections by the Brookings Institution, even after the economy begins to recover, child poverty rates will continue climbing for several more years – exceeding 22 percent statewide in 2012, the highest level since the early 1960s.

Even among children and families living above the federal poverty level, life is growing more difficult. Too many kids are suffering from hunger, physical or mental illness, or abuse and neglect aggravated by greater economic pressures on families. Too many youngsters are poorly educated, entering kindergarten unprepared for success in school or lacking

appropriate out-of-school learning supports. Too many parents are losing crucial work supports – or losing their public- or private-sector jobs, altogether – in ways that are exacerbated by state budget cuts and payment delays. Too many families struggle with the basics in life – making rent payments, affording groceries and covering utility bills.

In this briefing paper, Voices for Illinois Children lays-out some of the most significant difficulties confronting kids and families today, as well as recommended policy priorities. These suggestions reflect the fundamental principles that have helped guide our work during our 23 years as a statewide, nonprofit, nonpartisan group of children’s advocates. These include the research-grounded convictions that:

- **Children’s first eight years of life serve as a vital foundation we must strengthen to ensure kids’ success in school and later lives;**
- **Children of all ages – from birth to adulthood – have a variety of needs that require a continuum of supports to strengthen their learning and healthy development, as well as their families’ economic security; and**
- **Children do well when their families do well, and families do well when communities are in a position to help them address basic needs.**

As a nonprofit, nonpartisan group of children’s advocates, Voices endorses no candidates for elected office. However, during these most challenging of times, we hope this paper and its recommendations help inform:

- Development of policy positions by candidates for office; and
- Decision-making that is vital to voters’ participation in a vigorous democracy, choosing candidates they believe are committed to meeting the needs of kids and families.



For further information, contact:

*Sean Noble, director of government relations
(snoble@voices4kids.org, 312-516-5566) or*

*Kelley Talbot, policy associate
(ktalbot@voices4kids.org, 312-516-5572).*

*Check our Illinois Kids Count page
(www.voices4kids.org/library/kidscount.html)
for more data on the well-being of children and
families, and policy suggestions for
strengthening it.*

*This paper was written and prepared by Sean Noble, Kelley Talbot, Dawn Melchiorre,
Manya Khan and Larry Joseph.*

EDUCATION

A first-rate education enables children to fully develop their capacities to think, learn and become productive members of society. It provides students with the tools to succeed in a complex and quickly-changing world. Moreover, a well-rounded education takes into account not only kids' cognitive needs but their social, emotional and physical development, as well. Yet too many students – from preschool through high school – lack access to a truly high-quality educational experience. Historically, kindergarten teachers report about one in three students comes to school lacking the strong foundation they need to help ensure academic success and good behavior. These youngsters start their formal years of education lagging behind their peers and, too often, fall further and further back – trends borne-out years later in dropout rates, crime statistics, underemployment and poor health outcomes.

Despite efforts to erase educational achievement gaps among students, significant disparities persist. In 2007-08, about 75 percent of Illinois' African-American and Latino students graduated from high school, compared with a 93 percent graduation rate for whites and Asians. School-by-school funding inequities and inadequacies also remain critical stumbling blocks to progress: Illinois' overreliance on property taxes forces many students – particularly the most at-risk children – to learn in crowded, under-resourced classrooms. A 2008 report detailed the need for at least 1,100 more kindergarten and preschool classrooms statewide, not counting the needs of community-based early learning settings.

A wide array of learning supports – inside and outside the classroom – is necessary to boost academic achievement and promote healthy development of students. To ensure success, this work must begin years before a child steps into the classroom for the first time. Priorities include:

- **Early learning initiatives**, many of them supported through the Early Childhood Block Grant. This is the primary funding stream for Preschool for All efforts to improve and grow early learning supports over time, as resources allow, gradually extending access to all young children whose parents want it. At-risk children remain our top priority for these services. Yet while Illinois' work to bolster these learning supports has made us a national leader in early education, our years of progress have stalled recently. We need to get back on track toward realizing our multiyear goal of improving programs' access and quality, and strengthen such priorities as:
 - **Developmental services** for at-risk infants and toddlers, helping their parents to nurture their capacity for learning and healthy growth. These programs are funded through a birth-to-3 "set-aside" in the block grant.
 - **Preschool programs** for children 3 to 5 years old. Illinois' state-supported preK enrollments peaked at about 95,000 in FY2009, and budget cuts have begun eroding services since then – taking the benefits of preschool away from about 10,000 children, in addition to leaving tens of thousands more without access.
- **After-school activities**, which help keep youth and communities safe by reducing risky behavior, including crime, substance abuse and sexual activity. Youth with high levels of participation in programs are also more likely to graduate. Despite these proven results, approximately half of all K-12 children lack access to quality after-school programs.

Timely, thoughtful implementation of the new After-School Youth Development Program Act – which establishes after-school initiatives as a statewide priority – will strengthen and build upon existing efforts to ensure quality, accountability and accessibility. In addition, adequate support of Teen REACH after-school programs, which serve over 20,000 youth throughout the state, is essential to preserving access to quality opportunities; continuing to cut funding from out-of-school-time programs is counterproductive to what we know helps youth succeed.

- **Support for kids’ social and emotional learning**, particularly through school-based mental health services and the implementation of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Standards in schools. We need to ensure that children are not only academically strong and physically healthy, but well-supported in their social and emotional growth. Schools must make good use of the SEL standards to help students learn to manage their emotions and avoid violence, leading to improved academic outcomes and healthier school environments. The Illinois Children’s Mental Health Partnership is a coalition that’s providing a comprehensive and coordinated approach to address the social-emotional development of children and youth. (*See “health and human services” section for more information.*)
- **Community schools**, which bring together communities, families, and schools to leverage existing community resources and provide “wrap-around” services while strengthening parent involvement. They provide one model that can help meet complex needs. Illinois should build upon the success of existing community schools and expand these efforts to include additional schools.
- **Bilingual education** is critical for children with first languages other than English, who face a variety of extra challenges – including a greater likelihood of living in poverty. This is particularly important, given the increasingly diverse population of Illinois schools. While Spanish is the primary language of 80 percent of Illinois’ approximately 190,000 bilingual-education students, the remainder speak 140 other languages. It’s critical that we help all these children succeed in learning English; the well-being of communities and our workforce depend upon it. Yet bilingual education is continually subjected to budget cuts.
- Meeting the **capital needs** of overcrowded and outdated schools, from early childhood through high school. We should build upon successes such as the recent establishment of an accessible, bricks-and-mortar initiative for early learning programs’ capacity, quality and safety.
- **School leadership enhancement** and other best practices, as required by participation in federal Race to the Top initiatives. Through recent legislation, the state has taken an important step forward to increase the rigor of principal-preparation curricula and ensuring courses prepare school leaders for today’s complex challenges. Ongoing work to strengthen the collection and analysis of longitudinal data on students’ achievement is another critical component of school improvement. Illinois must continue to prioritize training and development of strong school leaders and implementation of measures to heighten teacher effectiveness.

HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

Thanks to policy advances such as the All Kids program, all Illinois children have the option of enrollment in affordable health care. As a result, the rate of uninsured children had fallen to about 4.5 percent early this year, a better rate than the national average and a significant improvement from Illinois' 2004-05 mark of 10.4 percent. Nonetheless, our efforts must continue, in light of national health care reforms. Additionally, the social and emotional development of too many children and youth is often neglected. While about 10 percent of Illinois kids suffer from mental illness severe enough to jeopardize successful development, only 20 percent of those youth receive the treatment they need – despite the fact that mental wellness is an essential building block for kids' overall health.



Much like our attention to children's educational needs, our work to improve their health outcomes must take a multifaceted approach and begin early in children's lives. The importance of proactively supporting children's healthy development from the very earliest age – including the months before birth –

is supported by research on children's brain development. Science tells us the brains of well-cared-for babies are fundamentally stronger than those of neglected infants, with lasting implications. However, supporting healthy development can prove difficult, and many moms and dads, such as teen parents, lack the information and assistance they need and want.

Children and their families need a continuum of supports to ensure their optimal growth and healthy development. Priorities include:

- **Mental health supports**, as recommended by the Illinois Children's Mental Health Partnership (ICMHP). This group of public- and private-sector experts has drawn a roadmap towards a comprehensive, better-coordinated, statewide system for strengthening children's social and emotional well-being. This comprehensive system must incorporate prevention efforts, early intervention, and treatment services for children from birth to adulthood.

ICMHP investments already are producing results in each of these areas, across Illinois. More young children are better able to access community-based mental health services, potentially preventing more severe problems. Better coordination of services is leading to increased efficiency in service delivery, and duplicate services are being eliminated. In the past five years, ICMHP's work has helped the state avoid about \$95 million in costs for unnecessary psychiatric inpatient hospitalization. These successes are jeopardized by deep budget cuts. Investments in ICMHP priorities strengthen a fragile mental health system in a cost-effective way.

- **Early Intervention (EI) services** for very young, at-risk children with developmental delays or disabilities. These services were established under the federal Individuals with

Disabilities Education Act. Illinois defines children with “developmental delays” as those functioning significantly below average (30 percent or greater) in areas such as cognitive, physical, or communication skills. In Illinois, children under age 3 who have developmental delays or disabilities – or are significantly at risk of them – are eligible for services that can include speech, language, physical and behavioral therapies.

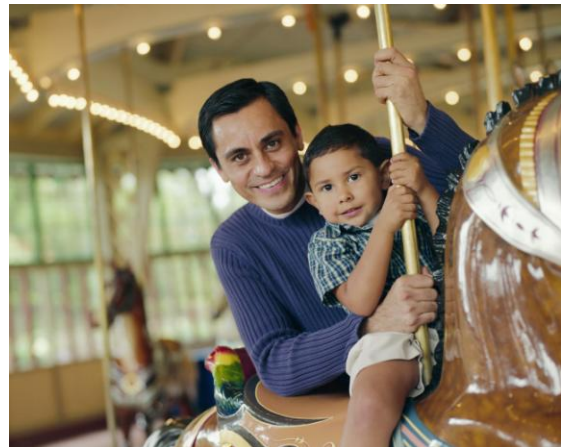
Illinois has made great strides in this area with successful programs such as Child Find, connecting more than 20,000 children to services. Yet, additional efforts and resources must be dedicated to these valuable programs, as well as the ongoing work of identifying children in need. EI helps children reach their potential and is cost-effective: Studies have shown every dollar spent on EI services produces a net savings of over \$13 in future service costs.

- **Home-visiting services** for the families of at-risk infants and toddlers. These voluntary programs – such as Healthy Families Illinois and Parents Too Soon – provide “parent coaches” who help new moms and dads to cope with the many challenges of caring for a new baby. Home visitors share information and provide resources that assist parents in fostering their children’s health, learning and socialization.

Families with consistent participation in home-visiting programs acquire skills that reduce the need for costly interventions and assistance in the future. Benefits include improved prenatal care and birth outcomes, reductions in child maltreatment, higher academic achievement and graduation rates among children and increased self-sufficiency among parents. Yet only about 45 percent of families in need of such services are receiving them – and in recent years there have been cuts in these critical programs.

- **Preventive health care** for children and parents alike. In the past decade, Illinois has made tremendous strides in improving coverage, through such programs as All Kids and FamilyCare. These initiatives are helping more families who can’t afford their employers’ insurance coverage – or whose employers offer no coverage.

Illinois’ proportion of uninsured children remains higher than that of such neighboring states as Indiana, Iowa, Wisconsin and Michigan. And many parents still lack insurance – 12.5 percent in 2007-08, which was nearly double the rate for children. We know moms and dads with preventive care are more likely to ensure their children visit the doctor regularly. Families without



insurance are more likely to resort to emergency-room visits to take care of problems that could be avoided through less costly, preventive care. A host of other preventive services are crucial to strengthening the health of kids and families, from immunization and nutrition efforts to family case management.

FAMILY ECONOMIC SECURITY

Even before the national recession took hold, many low- and middle-income families were struggling to pay their bills and falling behind in their efforts to secure the basics for their children. Between 1999 and 2008, median family income flat-lined in Illinois, barely keeping pace with inflation. In real dollars, married couples with children saw their earnings grow by less than 2 percent, while single mothers experienced an 8 percent drop in income.



A number of factors complicate these challenges for families. For example, Illinois' tax structure leaves low- and middle-income parents with disproportionately high tax bills, compared with wealthier households. The current system fails to raise adequate revenues for vital public services. And at the very time that families need help most – during an economic downturn – the state has been cutting back on these critical supports, ranging from early childhood to after-school programs.

Struggling families need help to survive the impacts of the recession, get back on their feet, and live in economic security. Priorities include:

- **Child care assistance** for low-income, working families. This state program serves two important roles: It's a significant job support for parents, and a vital piece of children's early learning puzzle. In addition, high-quality child care services can enhance the healthy social and emotional development of children. But high co-payment fees challenge many families' access to services, as these rates can claim 10 to 15 percent of a household's income.

Research has demonstrated that co-pays must be reduced to more realistic levels for families. Illinois has used federal funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to lower these fees, but this is a temporary solution to a long-term concern. In addition, in some areas of the state, reimbursement rates for providers fall well below "market" rates – with the effect of restricting low-income families' access to services. More appropriate rates would boost both access and quality.

- **The Earned Income Tax Credit**, which has enjoyed strong, bipartisan support and is proven to be one of the most effective tools for lifting our lowest-paid workers out of poverty. Illinois has a state-level EITC that "piggybacks" on the much larger, federal EITC. Together, these credits act as a powerful work incentive because, to claim them, taxpayers must be working and earning income. In fact, the federal EITC has led to significant increases in employment, particularly among single mothers. And EITC assistance helps low-income families put more of their earnings toward such essentials as food and rent. By keeping more of their earnings, families support their local economy with stronger purchasing power.

Both the state and federal credits also ease the disproportionately high tax responsibility borne by low-income households. But, compared with other states' EITCs, the Illinois

credit is small. We support an increase in the size of our state's EITC, quadrupling it from the maximum amount it now represents (currently, about \$280 for a family of two parents and three or more children).

- **Creation of a state-level Child Tax Credit**, to complement the federal CTC much like our state and federal Earned Income Tax Credits work together to improve tax fairness for working families. The federal CTC provides tax-credit help for low- and middle-income households with children – up to \$1,000 per child. Establishing a state CTC as a percentage of the federal credit would help families to afford the expenses involved in raising and caring for children.
- **Temporary Assistance for Needy Families**, which provides cash assistance to many households in greatest need. Cash-grant amounts are inadequate to help these families in deepest need. During nearly 15 years of welfare-to-work reforms, Illinois has shifted more TANF-source funding into such vital programs as child care assistance and the state EITC. However, leaving the welfare rolls does not equate to achieving true self-sufficiency for families. And Illinois now spends only about 9 percent of its federal TANF grant on direct, cash assistance to needy families, the smallest percentage in the nation. Illinois TANF cash grant amounts must be increased to meet the needs of the state's lowest income households, while maintaining other vital supports they need.
- **Protection of vital services from budget cuts and payment delays**, through stabilization of Illinois' shaky revenue system. A better balance in how we raise and use state revenues is necessary. Critical public services needed by low- and middle-income families support thousands of private- as well as public-sector jobs. Early learning and after-school programs not only create thousands of jobs, they allow working parents to access quality child care and similar work supports. Due to budget cuts and late payments, programs have been forced to cut-back or close altogether. A comprehensive, sustainable budget solution is needed including more reforms, appropriate spending efficiencies and tax modernization. (See "state fiscal integrity" section for more information.)



STATE FISCAL INTEGRITY

The highly unstable condition of Illinois' finances underlies and complicates the many challenges that families face in the areas of education, health and human services and household economic security.

The national recession has had a devastating impact on state revenues. Our budget deficit stands at more than \$11 billion for FY 2011 and is projected to grow to more than \$17 billion next year. As our revenue shortfall grows, services are being cut deeper. Delays in state payments to schools and community-based providers grow longer and longer, forcing further cutbacks and closures. At the end of June, the state's backlog of unpaid bills was nearly \$5 billion.

Although there's no one answer to these problems, it's clear that cuts, borrowing and payment delays alone are not addressing the problem. In fact, delaying more comprehensive action only worsens our problems and increases our costs over time.

Illinois policymakers have yet to embrace a comprehensive and balanced approach to the state budget crisis – one that would produce a significant amount of new, recurring revenue, include appropriate and carefully constructed spending restraints, and incorporate meaningful fiscal reforms that complement other recently enacted government reforms.

Even in strong economic times, our current tax structure fails to produce adequate revenue to fulfill the state's obligations to children and other vulnerable Illinoisans. It lacks the progressivity necessary to treat working, low- and middle-income families fairly, as lower-income households continue to pay a greater share of their income in state and local taxes than do wealthier households, including those whose incomes have soared in the past 20 to 30 years.



It's important to recognize that state programs and services – from schools and road construction to health care and public safety– are at grave risk as long as our budget and tax policies continue to ignore the mounting needs of struggling communities.

The state must achieve greater fiscal integrity through implementation of a comprehensive budget solution that reforms and modernizes our tax system, prioritizes spending and strategically contains costs. These efforts go hand-in-hand with the important work of restoring the public's confidence in government's ability to responsibly serve the people of Illinois.