

Maintain 'Preschool for All' Progress

Extend 'sunset' date to give every young child a better opportunity for success in school and life

Vote 'yes' on HB4705 (Lightford-Demuzio-Millner-Martinez)

THE CHALLENGE: Tens of thousands more young children are entering kindergarten prepared for success, through Illinois' landmark Preschool for All efforts. **But this progress ends in 2008 unless its "sunset" date is extended.**

THE SOLUTION: Move the Preschool for All law's sunset date to 2010.

BACKGROUND: Illinois has a long history of supporting voluntary, early childhood education. Yet until recently, these services were available only to at-risk children – and fell far short of helping all of them, let alone the thousands of other youngsters who could benefit and whose parents wanted such services.

In 2006, the General Assembly overwhelmingly approved the Preschool for All plan, based on the research and recommendations of Illinois Early Learning Council. This plan established the statutory goal of extending access to high-quality preschool to every 3- and 4-year-old child whose parents choose it. Access to the program would grow as resources were made available, with at-risk children always remaining our top priority.

Resources are prioritized first for qualified preschool providers who serve primarily at-risk children, then to those providers serving primarily middle-income families (with annual incomes less than four times the federal poverty rate – about \$82,600 for a family of four). Other qualified programs are eligible for remaining funds.

The Preschool for All approach not only calls for greater program access, but also improved quality. (*See reverse for key quality and accountability components.*) A June 30, 2008 "sunset date" was placed on the expansion plans to give legislators a chance to review progress.

PROGRESS ACHIEVED, BUT MANY NEEDS REMAIN: In the past two years, Illinois has extended services to thousands more children statewide through 181 new or expanded preK grants, as well as 21 new or expanded grants for birth-to-age-3 programs. And yet:

- Only about half of the FY2008 preK grant applications received funding – and only 4 percent of the grant applications for infant and toddler services.
- We have not yet been able to fund any preschool programs serving primarily middle-income children – and many at-risk kids still need help in some communities.

If Preschool for All is not maintained, many children would lose existing services. State-supported preschool would revert to its former, "at-risk only" status, meaning programs serving any other children would lose their resources.

Preschool for All is not an "entitlement," and removing its sunset date does not lock officials into any specific dollar amounts. The program's progress is entirely contingent upon the resources that the General Assembly makes available each year.

HB4705 also streamlines two existing reporting requirements into one date, November 1. In the past, these reports on program progress have been made to state officials on needlessly different dates.

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Key quality & accountability components of Illinois' current Preschool for All efforts include:

- Two-year program for 3- as well as 4-year-olds whose parents choose to participate
- Priority services for at-risk children with gradual expansion to others
- Expanded support for at-risk infants and toddlers
- High standards, quality curricula and assessments
- Well-trained, certified teaching staff with professional development opportunities
- Variety of settings chosen by parents (schools, child care, other community-based providers)
- Parent involvement
- 180 half-day sessions with small class sizes and good adult/child ratios