

Young Children Need Quality Learning Environments

Include early learning programs in a capital budget

THE NEED: Young children need safe, welcoming and developmentally appropriate environments to stimulate learning. Yet in some areas of the state – for example, many growing Latino communities – families’ demand for preschool far outpaces the availability of high-quality learning space. Early childhood teachers lack the facilities needed to help children enter school prepared for success.

REQUEST: Invest at least \$25 million in the facility needs of early childhood education, as the Governor has proposed, with a priority on construction and renovation projects in communities with a demonstrated gap between high needs and low, current capacities. A portion of any new state capital funds should be specifically dedicated to early childhood programs to ensure appropriate support for expansion.

BACKGROUND: Through “Preschool for All,” Illinois has become a national leader in the improvement and expansion of early learning opportunities for young children. State policymakers have begun to wisely invest in significantly extending services to tens of thousands of children who still need them, as well as improving such priorities as teacher training, program evaluation and accountability. These resources are administered through Illinois’ Early Childhood Block Grant.

But this funding does not help early childhood providers repair crumbling facilities, expand upon overcrowded space or build new preschool classrooms in the many areas of Illinois that desperately need them. Accordingly, too many children still lack a realistic chance for a high-quality early learning experience.

Across the state, school districts have identified the need for at least 593 additional preschool classrooms, according to a 2008 assessment conducted by the Illinois State Board of Education and Capital Development Board. And that figure only reflects the shortcomings of school-based programs whose district officials responded to this survey; actual needs are much higher.

Preschool for All allows community-based providers – such as child care centers and nursery schools – to apply for state early childhood funding. By including such providers, the program can better accommodate the needs of working families through a variety of settings of parents’ choice – often, closer to their homes or places of employment. However, as is the case in schools, too many community facilities are old, run-down and in need of repairs to meet state licensing standards. Currently, no capital funds are available to these important providers serving young children.

Building and renovating early childhood facilities creates jobs. And when those capital projects allow for an expansion of services, there is additional economic activity created as staff and other program resources are needed. Investing in young children’s early learning is the ultimate economic driver in another important way: helping to create a strong future workforce in our state.

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