Voices for Illinois Children champion the full development of every child in Illinois to ensure the future well-being of everyone in the state. We work with families, communities and policymakers on all issues to help children grow up happy, healthy, nurtured, safe and well-educated.

We are committed to the well-being of every child. All children, regardless of circumstances, are vital to the preservation of a vigorous democracy. We believe children do well when they grow up in strong, supportive families, and that families do well in supportive communities. We believe in focusing on preventing problems by employing comprehensive, well-researched strategies to improve children’s education and health care and to strengthen their families’ economic security and the social services on which they depend.

Since 1987, Voices has helped parents, community leaders and policymakers understand and respond to the issues facing children and families. Together we have affected the well-being of an entire generation of Illinois children by achievements in early childhood education, health insurance, family economic security, and children’s mental health. Voices builds better lives by raising public awareness about crucial issues affecting children and families, building coalitions to initiate and pursue policy solutions, and mobilizing individuals, groups and communities to speak up for children.

All Systems Go is a publication of the “Great at Eight” Initiative of Voices for Illinois Children
Nine-year-old children who are on track developmentally enter fourth grade reading to learn, having spent previous years learning to read. They can demonstrate a striking level of competence, delving into books on a variety of subjects and handling math problems of increasing complexity. They comprehend concepts and can apply what they learn in one arena when they encounter new situations. In both academic and extracurricular interests—sports, music, art—they begin to reflect realistically on their own abilities. Friendships are important and they have learned to process points of view other than their own, although peer groups do not yet play the dominant role they will have in middle school. Fourth-graders are increasingly self-aware and have started to develop a sense of right and wrong.

Far too few Illinois fourth-graders look like these “ready to learn” children...

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VOICES FOR ILLINOIS CHILDREN

Far too few Illinois fourth-graders are “ready to learn,” as standardized exam results show. At the end of third grade, children take national tests of reading and math proficiency for the first time. Despite gains in the past few years, only 65 percent of Illinois fourth-graders were at or above basic reading level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exam in 2009, and only 36 percent were considered proficient.1 That is only part of the picture. There are also large disparities between racial-ethnic groups and income groups. Among white students, 90 percent scored at or above “basic” on the NAEP reading exam, compared with 54 percent of African-American students and 72 percent of Hispanic students. Only 66 percent of low-income students were at or above the basic achievement level. In Illinois, the gaps between white and black students and between low-income students and other students are substantially wider than comparable gaps for the nation as a whole.

While most school districts have minority and low-income children, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) children are disproportionately poor and minority. According to the Illinois State Board of Education, 83.6 percent of CPS students are low-income and 14.4 percent have limited English proficiency; over 60,000 CPS students speak Spanish as their home language.2 In Chicago and other Illinois cities where

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over 80 percent of children are low-income and minority, including East St. Louis, Harvey, Cicero, and Chicago Heights, a majority of children enter school with multiple risk factors that hinder school success. Children are resilient. But when they have more than two of the major risk factors—poverty, non-English home language, mother with educational less than high school or GED, and single-parent household—their progress often slows between kindergarten and third grade.3 Nationally, 85 percent of children in high-poverty schools, whether in cities, suburbs or rural areas, fail to reach the “proficient” level of reading by fourth grade— and that puts them disproportionately on a track for school drop-out and either low-skills jobs or unemployment.4

This is an urgent situation for both Illinois and our nation. Reading by the end of third grade is a critical benchmark. During first through third grade, children are learning to read; by fourth grade, they should read to learn. If they are still reading at the first or second grade level, they might not catch up—ever. “Let’s not say, ‘you’ve got to make it by then, or it’s over,'” cautions Samuel Meisels, president of the Erikson Institute. “But this third-grade point is pretty important,” he adds, “an often-accurate indication of whether a child is headed toward school success or struggles.”5 Reading, math and other academic skills are not the only indicators of school success or potential challenges. Just as importantly, children might lack those social-emotional skills that are evident in the competent fourth-grader—and that are essential for success in the classroom and workplace. Unable to set goals, work productively with classmates, apply themselves to long-term projects, or manage their frustrations, they may have social and behavioral problems in and out of school. Fourth grade is often a turning point, when children who cannot keep up or catch up begin to skip school and get in trouble. Some children are not ready to learn at fourth grade because they have missed too much school. Nationally, one in 10 kindergartners and first-graders are chronically absent (missing 10% or more of the school year).

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1 National Center on Education Statistics: http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/
5 Meisels, Samuel J. (June 9, 2010). Presentation to the Voices for Illinois Children Board of Directors, Chicago.

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ALL SYSTEMS GO: KIDS READY FOR SUCCESS

In Illinois, we have for many years been focused on kindergarten readiness—for good reasons and with good success. We have made significant investments in excellent, research-based early childhood education. Home-visiting for families of infants and toddlers and high-quality preschool for 3 and 4-year-olds can benefit all children, but particularly those from low-income backgrounds, might signal problems at home or in the community that need to be addressed.6 Stress at home from such wide-ranging causes as foreclosure, domestic violence, or fear of deportation—to name just a few possibilities—may spill over into the classroom, where hard-pressed teachers often lack the resources to investigate the reasons behind children's absences or behavioral changes.

BUILDING SYSTEMS THAT WORK

In Illinois, the gaps between white and black students and between low-income students and other students are substantially wider than comparable gaps for the nation as a whole.
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boosting the learning skills that they will need in kindergarten and beyond. However, research has shown that these effects can fade without sustained follow-up. For many children, personal and environmental support during the ecological transition to formal school—where they must adapt to changes in roles, settings, and expectations—is essential to maintaining and building on their positive gains from preschool. 8

Home-visiting, excellent child care, high-quality preschool, early intervention for children with developmental delays or disabilities, excellent and appropriate instruction in school—all of these are important in preparing vulnerable kids for academic achievement by fourth grade. However, there is no magic moment during the birth-to-8 years when a single intervention will make all the difference. As renowned educator Rima Shore comments, we need to move "beyond the crisis mentality that has repeatedly swung taxpayer's and policymakers' attention from one 'problem grade' to another," and instead develop "a coherent approach designed to sustain high-quality programs and reflect today's best understandings of how children learn in their formative early years." 9

We know what works... Abundant research has revealed the characteristics of successful programs and practices as those that:

• support continuity
• enhance capacity for organization of services
• promote instructional practices
• encourage family support services

We know what works in getting kids, families, schools, and communities ready for achieving success. Abundant research has revealed the characteristics of successful programs and practices as those that: (a) support continuity; (b) enhance capacity for organization of services; (c) promote instructional practices; and (d) encourage family support services. 10

Programs that successfully address children’s learning needs must be comprehensive, span multiple years, and target key transition points, such as the transition from preschool to kindergarten. Public policies need to support the coordination and continuity of such programs within the context of a learning system that focuses upon laying a solid foundation for success during children’s initial and most fundamentally significant eight years of life.

Learning doesn’t start (or stop) in school. It begins at birth and takes place in multiple settings. Recent initiatives have focused on the importance of integrated prekindergartens to grade-3 (preK-3) approaches in laying student achievement and laying the groundwork for later learning. 11 While the preK-3 school continuum must be supported for good outcomes, an even broader, developmental view is needed—one that starts at birth and continues at least through age 8. A “whole child” developmental approach acknowledges the various programs and practices that contribute to success in school, ranging from challenging curricula to social-emotional learning supports to high-quality teachers and beyond. Learning takes place not only in classrooms but also in various academic, recreational, cultural, artistic, and community out-of-school activities—as well as in children’s homes and childcare settings.

Successful birth-to-8 policies and practices embrace a "bolder, broader approach" 12 to kids’ learning and development. This approach, espoused by a growing number of distinguished educators and experts in child development, breaks with conventional education policymaking by recognizing the importance not just of formal education but also of high-quality early childhood and preschool programs, after-school and summer programs, and other measures that develop and strengthen parents’ capacity to support their children’s education.

Every child needs learning supports, and some kids need extra focus and attention. Census projections suggest that minority children are now or soon will become the majority in many of the schools in Illinois, especially in the early grades. If these children are to succeed in the 21st century, serious attention must be paid—in families, schools and communities—to bridging demographic achievement gaps. That will mean addressing Illinois’ method of funding education, which results in some of the worst school-to-school and student-to-student inequities in the nation. The state’s overreliance on property taxes to fund education creates huge investment gaps between property-wealthy and property-poor communities. Combined state and local funding of education varies widely, from more than $20,000 per student to less than $7,500. 13 If our goal is to have every child competent by fourth grade, let alone by the time they enter college or the workforce, these disparities must be addressed.

Much of achievement gaps can be traced to what is happening outside of formal school settings, during afternoons, weekends, and summer vacations. From a young age, middle-class students routinely participate in a range of cultural, athletic, and academic enrichment activities that are often unavailable to low-income children. Some of these activities support academic achievement and cognitive growth; others contribute importantly to the development of physical health, character, artistic expression, and social development.

Disparities in health and access to preventive services also affect student achievement. Children with poor nutrition, chronic health problems, and painful dental cavities have poor attendance and concentration.

6 Reynolds et al., 2006.
10 Reynolds et al., 2006.
12 See www.broadapproach.org for the statement by influential educators on “A Bolder, Bolder Approach to Education.”
Voices for Illinois Children

All Systems Go: Ready Children, Ready Families, Ready Education, Ready Communities

"Too often government officials design programs for children as if they lived their lives in silos, as if each stage of a child’s life were independent of the other, unconnected to what came before or what lies ahead."

—James Heckman

Systems that most effectively support children’s learning have certain basic characteristics. They are infused with a strong developmental perspective and recognize that learning begins at birth, is a continuous developmental process, and occurs in a range of settings. They are designed to reach out to and engage families, especially low-income, minority and non-English-speaking parents whose own educational opportunities have been limited. They promote continuity and systems integration, starting with family support for parents of infants and continuing through preschool, the transition to kindergarten, and the early years of elementary school.

Although we still have much work to do, Illinois has made great strides in building programs that span the years from birth to 5 and in starting to put into place the elements of a comprehensive, coordinated early learning system from birth through third grade. The state’s early education system, guided by the state’s Early Learning Council, has been cited as a model of coordination—a system that provides “an array of early education opportunities that are of high-quality and aligned with curricula and standards in the elementary grades.”

Unfortunately, the promise of Illinois’ Preschool for All approach—that every young child someday would have access to voluntary early learning supports—has not yet been fulfilled. In fact, the state fiscal crisis, along with the poor economy, has slowed our progress and actually resulted in loss of early education services for some vulnerable children and families.

Getting the birth-to-5 system back on track is crucially important. Then, to ensure that every child is ready to learn by fourth grade, we have to build up and out. Our motto should be, “all systems go.” That means there is vertical alignment from birth to age 8 and horizontal systems alignment across the family support, health, mental health, educational and community programs. It means system alignment from birth to age 8 and horizontal systems alignment across the family support, health, mental health, educational and community programs.

There is strong support for children’s own vital systems of development: physical, cognitive, and social-emotional. The research on preK-3 systems demonstrates that children at risk of failure can succeed in systems that “begin with full-day prekindergarten and kindergarten programs that are laser-focused on instruction and learning. These schools use a standards-based curriculum, supported by shared professional development, shared diagnostic assessments and shared accountability between educators and families. The entire effort is disciplined and data-driven.”

Three factors—alignment of standards, curriculum, and assessment—are particularly important in preventing the possible fade-out of preschool gains during the K-3 years.

“Readiness” involves a number of interlocking elements, supported by informed, coordinated state and local systems and policies that are funded for long-term success:

**Ready Children**
- Are physically and psychologically healthy. They have a medical home and receive routine pediatric, optometric, and dental care to reduce health barriers to success in school. While there is great variability among children, ready children walk, talk, and engage with others pretty much “on schedule.”
- Developmental delays and learning disabilities are detected and addressed early and consistently in appropriate settings. Social-emotional skills—such as self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy—are fostered in caring ways and settings.

**Ready Families**
- The family plays the most important role in a young child’s life. Ready families are safe, stable, and nurturing. They have the educational and financial resources they need to provide a strong foundation for their children’s well-being. Because mothers’ cognitive skills are critical in children’s cognitive development, investments in mothers’ continued education support children’s school success. Public policies should support family members in their role as the child’s first teachers.

**Ready Education**
- From birth to 8. Artificial separations of child care, preschool, grades K-3 and other early learning supports need to be broken down.
- Ready early learning systems begin for children at birth and provide continuous, age-appropriate services, supports, and instruction through third grade. Successful early...
learning systems are characterized by—among other things—involvement of parents, enduring partnerships between schools and community-based agencies, and strong school leaders and teachers committed to coordination between early childhood education and elementary schools.20

READY COMMUNITIES play a key role in providing families with access to information, services, high-quality early learning experiences, and an enriching variety of out-of-school-time activities—cultural, athletic, artistic, and social. Community leaders can also break down “silos,” bringing together people from different systems and pursuing a vision of coordination and cooperation in the interest of all children. As sources of innovation, pilot projects and on-the-ground experience, communities can also inform state policies. The business community can play key roles by being active partners in working towards children’s healthy development and success.

BECOMING A READY STATE

The National Governors Association Task Force on School Readiness has espoused the concept of a “ready state” to support ready children, families, schools and communities. Ready states have a clear vision and strategic plan, have strong gubernatorial leadership over a coordinated state system, and ensure accountability for results.21 Systems that are coordinated, high-quality, innovative and data-driven are also being encouraged and rewarded by the federal Department of Education through such strategies as the Race to the Top competition. Illinois’ new P-20 Council is charged with making recommendations to guide development of education at all levels to avoid fragmentation, promote improved teaching and learning, and cultivate accountability and efficiency. State officials are developing a longitudinal data system to help collect the information that is critical to the improvement of our education structure and practices.

What will it take for these promising developments to evolve into a stable, integrated system to support the education and healthy development of all children birth to 8 in Illinois? Political leadership is crucial in working toward sound public policies that strengthen the well-being of kids and families—and then funding those initiatives adequately and fairly. Policies must be informed by research and best practices, such as those described in this issue brief.

However, proposals for effective and relevant practices will be generated not solely at the top levels of government, policymaking and advocacy, but also through multiple conversations at the community level. Stakeholders—parents, teachers, administrators, community leaders and others—need to be engaged in the process of envisioning a robust birth-to-8 system and of grappling with the myriad questions that arise in the process of systems change. Building upon the successes of many years of collaborative work to help lay a strong birth-to-5 foundation for Illinois children’s success, Voices will continue to play a leading role in these efforts—organizing numerous activities to inform stakeholders about needs of young children, sharing research about what works to support early learning, and looking at several topics through this broader, “whole child” lens. Parents, educators, and policymakers will take part in dialogues about how best to support children and families during the critical early years. Communities throughout the state will have opportunities to voice concerns and work together in deciding how the needs of young children might be addressed through state policies and programs.

One of the major responsibilities of state government is to fund public education. In addressing funding disparities, Illinois needs to pursue strategies to improve the learning of all students by ensuring that every school, regardless of location, has the resources necessary to help kids succeed. Funding questions have generally focused on the amount of the “foundation level,” that is, the minimum level of per-pupil funding from state and local sources. It is time to shift the basic school-funding questions to include not only “How much is being spent per child?” but also, “How can we best use resources to improve student learning?” Parents and concerned citizens throughout the state will have a chance to consider this question—and many more—over the next several years.

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ALL SYSTEMS GO: KIDS READY FOR SUCCESS

When ALL SYSTEMS are GO, the needs of young children are addressed on many levels, both inside and outside of the classroom

ALL SYSTEMS GO

Ready Communities
• Enriching activities for kids during out-of-school time
• Accessible vital services, such as health care and mental health supports
• Safe neighborhoods, affordable housing and public transportation options

Ready Education
• Meaningful opportunities for engagement of parents and entire families
• High-quality preschool, childcare and other early learning services
• Strong, standards-based K-3 curriculum
• Social-emotional learning supports

Ready Families
• Quality prenatal services
• Support for economic security, financial literacy, job training
• Home-visiting “coaching” to strengthen parenting skills
• Parental involvement in children’s learning and literacy

Ready Children
• Nurturing for healthy physical, cognitive and social-emotional development
• Early identification and interventions for developmental delays or disabilities
• A “medical home,” good nutrition, on-time immunizations, and other preventive care

We invite you to be part of the process, as we shape a policy agenda for Illinois that will ensure that every child is ready to learn and participate productively in the 21st century.

To learn more, visit www.voices4kids.org.