

Foreword

We know that a good education benefits not only children but our entire society in providing a skilled workforce, a better quality of life and a stronger democracy. But it's no secret that public education in Illinois is in crisis. Most school districts have budget deficits. Far too many students fail to meet learning standards. The achievement gap between students in poor and wealthy schools is among the worst in the nation.

If we want to be serious about improving education, we must address what happens inside and outside the classroom. Student achievement is in-

fluenced almost equally by home and family factors and classroom quality issues. Per-pupil spending, teacher quality and classroom size certainly matter, but home environment, family economic status, health and early childhood experiences matter as much, if not more.

Last year's "Illinois Kids Count" report laid out 12 recommendations that would improve learning for Illinois children (*see sidebar*). This year we take a look at how we're doing. As the key findings starting on page 4 show, data reflect that progress is incremental but headed in the right direction for many of our recommendations. Enrollment in early childhood education programs is climbing. More low-income children are covered by health insurance. Fewer children are found to be abused or neglected. There have been other policy gains as well—such as the beginning steps toward a comprehensive children's mental health system and expansion of early childhood education—at a time when state government has faced budget shortfalls.

But the slow progress of these gains coupled with those areas that show no change or a change for the worse indicate that we need to do a lot more to truly have an impact on learning. We can no longer be satisfied with the status quo. Illinois isn't going to see real improvements in education quality or student learning ability until we make significant, large-scale changes such as:

- Adopting the Illinois Early Learning Council's "Preschool for All" proposal that calls for creating a better system of early childhood education. "Preschool for All" will improve child care, preK and Head Start programs by creating uniform quality standards and expanding access to reach more 3- and 4-year-olds, especially those at risk

of school failure. That means parents will be able to choose where their child receives early learning and be assured of high quality in every setting. The proposal also includes funding for services to at-risk families with children from birth to age 3.

- Reforming school funding in a manner that generates more money and distributes funds more fairly, as advocated by the A+ Illinois campaign. Reducing schools' reliance on property taxes by increasing revenue from other, fairer sources, including income and sales taxes, would "bring the bottom up" and not take away resources from higher-spending districts. A comprehensive restructuring of state finances also would benefit the human services that support children's learning ability.
- Creating and funding a comprehensive children's mental health system that extends promotion, prevention, early intervention and treatment to more children, from birth to 18, and supports their families. This effort stresses the importance of social and emotional development beginning at birth and determines social and emotional learning standards to be used in schools.

By examining data at the county level, "Illinois Kids Count" aims to further our understanding of the quality of life for children and promote a holistic view that shows how these indicators of well-being—and their corresponding challenges and solutions—interrelate. Improving a child's life through learning requires partnerships: between parents and schools, communities

Twelve Ways to Improve Learning

1. Invest in and improve early childhood education
2. Improve school funding
3. Help children read
4. Decrease class sizes
5. Provide services for developmentally disabled children
6. Support families in providing for basic needs
7. Ensure access to health care
8. Strengthen mental health supports for children
9. Provide good nutrition
10. Protect children from health hazards
11. Boost after-school and community-school initiatives
12. Prevent, protect and support abused children



Improving the Lives of Children Across Illinois

and schools, state agencies and programs, public policies and funding that supports collaboration and integration. While our recommendations focus on public policies and programs that can impact learning, family involvement clearly benefits academic achievement for children of all races and economic backgrounds.

Statistics illustrating the “Twelve Ways to Improve Learning” and child and family demographics are displayed in tables beginning on page 44. Data profiles for each of Illinois’ 102 counties and Chicago are available online at www.voices4kids.org/illinoiskidscount.htm, along with a searchable database of statistics. A variety of guest authors address the learning recommendations starting on page 18, including a message from the Governor at right.

I hope the information in this report and on the web motivates people to join together to make children a priority. Adopting these 12 recommendations can have a long-lasting impact on education and on the quality of life for all of us.



Jerry Stermer, President
Voices for Illinois Children



By Governor Rod Blagojevich

We have no greater asset than our children, and we know what children need to have happy, successful lives: a loving family that can meet their basic needs, quality education, good health and safe places to live, play and learn.

My administration is committed to positively impacting the lives of children across this state. Last year, almost every state in the nation faced a significant fiscal challenge, and nearly every one of those states either raised income or sales taxes, cut spending for education, health care, and public safety, or did a combination of both. In Illinois, we worked hard to stray from that national trend, and I’m proud to say that we were successful in our efforts. By investing over \$1 billion in K-12 education, expanding access to health care and strengthening public safety, we have made great strides in improving the lives of families and children.

In the area of education, we expanded the Early Childhood Block Grant by \$60 million allowing for the enrollment of an additional 17,000 at-risk children in high-quality preschool programs. Ad-

ditionally, in fiscal year 2003 we fought for \$400 million in additional recurring education funding and in fiscal year 2004 won \$389 million in targeted funding (a total increase of \$364 million). These increases have yielded an additional \$404 increase in the per-student General State Aid foundation level.

Access to quality health care is another key component to every child’s educational success. Healthy children miss less school and consequently have the opportunity to learn more. In 2003, I expanded eligibility for KidCare, our children’s health insurance program, to children in families with incomes up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level. After increasing eligibility requirements and aggressively promoting the program across the state, we were able to provide health care to more than 60,000 additional children.

One of the most challenging responsibilities of a Governor is to ensure that resources are allocated in a way that they will provide appropriate responses to the horrible events that may surround child abuse or neglect in Illinois families and communities. I am confident that we have improved the state’s response by strengthening and adding more response teams to the Child Abuse Hotline. We have also lowered caseloads of the private child welfare agencies and continue to work to keep the caseload of the child protection workers at one of the lowest levels in the country. In addition, Illinois continues to be a leader in recovering abducted children through our innovative enhancements to the AMBER Alert System.

I am proud of the progress we have made thus far on behalf of families and children in this state, and I remain committed to improving the lives of children in Illinois. Working together, I have no doubt that we will accomplish all of our goals.