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## **Many Illinois Children Lacking Critical Learning Supports, “Kids Count” Report Finds**

*Proposed state and federal budget cuts would harm children, families*

CHICAGO – Nearly half a million Illinois children are growing up in conditions that negatively affect their learning ability even before they enter school, and too many children are not receiving a quality education, according to a new report, “Illinois Kids Count 2005: Twelve Ways to Improve Learning,” released today by Voices for Illinois Children.

Voices’ 13<sup>th</sup> annual “Illinois Kids Count” report found 15.3 percent of children live in poverty, which makes them more likely to have learning disabilities and drop out of school. Thousands of children face other factors that affect their learning ability, such as a lack of health insurance, child abuse and lead poisoning.

“Illinois Kids Count” also found that thousands of children do not receive a quality education. More than one-third of students in third, eighth and 11<sup>th</sup> grade struggle to read, and nearly one in five students will not graduate from high school. Significant achievement gaps among racial and ethnic groups exist in reading scores and graduation rates. In third grade, for example, only 49.3 percent of Hispanic and 34.8 percent of African-American students meet state reading standards, while 82.6 percent of Asian and 76 percent of white students do.

“Student achievement is influenced almost equally by home and family factors and school quality issues,” Voices President Jerry Stermer said. “If we don’t make significant changes in the way we support children and their families, too many Illinois children will continue to miss out on what they need to succeed. We must make sure that state and federal funding is preserved, not cut, for critical programs that benefit Illinois children and families.”

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The proposed federal budget being debated includes potential cuts of \$477 million from Illinois' education funding over the next five years and \$1.28 billion from Illinois' Medicaid funding over the next 10 years, forcing the state to either come up with more money or make cutbacks.

While Gov. Rod Blagojevich and the Illinois General Assembly have increased funding for education and health care, this year's proposed state budget cuts funding for crucial prevention-oriented programs, including a \$960,000 reduction for parent-coaching programs that encourage healthy child development (Healthy Families Illinois/Parents Too Soon) and a \$2.6 million reduction in after-school programs like Teen REACH.

"Illinois Kids Count" stresses the need for a comprehensive solution that puts equal emphasis on classroom quality and family support issues and follows up on the 12 recommendations to improve learning that were outlined in the 2004 report:

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.

Progress on the recommendations is generally headed in the right direction. More developmentally disabled young children are receiving therapies – up 28.7 percent, from 11,506 in 2001 to 14,808 in 2004. More low-income children are covered by health insurance – up 42 percent, from 781,303 in 1998 to 1,109,254 in 2004. And fewer children are found to be abused or neglected – down 26.6 percent, from a rate of 10.2 per 1,000 children in 1997 to 7.5 per 1,000 in 2003. Yet proposed federal and state budget cuts may turn the tide in the wrong direction for Illinois children.

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Key findings include:

**Early Learning Quality and Availability Do Not Meet Need**

Children benefit from high-quality early childhood education experiences that give them a solid foundation for school success. Yet one out of every three kindergarteners is unprepared for school, and many parents – including middle-income earners – struggle to find affordable programs. The number of licensed child care providers statewide increased 12.8 percent from 1999 to 2004, yet only 5.6 percent are accredited, a sign of program quality.

“We must continue to improve and expand early education by securing the last of three \$30 million funding increases pledged by Gov. Rod Blagojevich and by adopting a policy that would provide preschool for all young children whose parents want to enroll them,” Stermer said.

**School Funding is Inadequate and Unfair**

Children will benefit from a fairer school funding system that provides more resources to schools in need. Illinois has wide disparities in school funding – per-pupil spending ranges from \$4,000 to more than \$18,000 among districts. Recent increases in school funding have barely outpaced inflation, and the state’s guaranteed per-pupil foundation level is almost \$1,000 short of the recommended \$6,000 needed for a quality education.

“We need to reform school funding in a way that generates more money and distributes funds more fairly,” Stermer said. “Reducing schools’ reliance on property taxes by increasing revenue from other sources, including income and sales taxes, would ‘bring the bottom up’ and not take away resources from higher-spending districts. A comprehensive restructuring of the tax system also will benefit the human services that support children and their families.”

**Plans Are Underway to Improve Children’s Mental Health Supports**

Children will benefit from a comprehensive mental health system that provides prevention, early intervention and treatment to children from birth to 18. Yet one in 10 Illinois children suffers from mental health challenges severe enough to cause some level of impairment, and only two of those 10 receive services.

“We must create and fund a children’s mental health system that serves more children, supports their families and emphasizes the importance of social and emotional development beginning at birth,” Stermer said.

“Illinois Kids Count” is designed to help people, families, communities and policymakers

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recognize trends facing children and families and design responses that will help all children succeed. The report features guest essays on each of the “Twelve Ways to Improve Learning” from experts across the state.

Voices for Illinois Children is a statewide, non-profit, public awareness and advocacy organization that is building the future of Illinois through its children. Voices works with parents, communities and lawmakers to ensure all children grow up healthy, loved, safe and well-educated.

“Illinois Kids Count 2005: Twelve Ways to Improve Learning” is published with funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children and families in the United States.

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**“Illinois Kids Count 2005” is available online and features individual county data pages at Voices for Illinois Children’s Web site at [www.voices4kids.org/illinoiskidscount.htm](http://www.voices4kids.org/illinoiskidscount.htm).**