

# VOICES

BUILDING BETTER LIVES

## KIDS COUNT DINNER: EDUCATION FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

**E**ducation doesn't start or stop with school. In fact, many students find that their most meaningful educational experiences take place outside of school.

This is certainly true for Iris Lopez, a determined young woman who told her story at the annual Kids Count dinner on October 7. Iris was, in her words, "hanging out with the wrong crowd" and getting into trouble before she was referred to Girl World, a program of Alternatives, Inc.

Now a student at Wright College, Iris credits the program with introducing her to community service, giving her leadership experience, and helping her get her life on track to become the first person in her family to graduate from high school and go to college. Over four years she moved from new member of Girl World to leader and now Americorps youth staff.

While schools must take the lead in ensuring that children are well-educated, out-of-school-time programs are part of a

comprehensive educational system. Currently, far too few Illinois youth have the chance to attend afterschool programs that support their academic success and broaden their horizons.

A new law sets Illinois on a course toward meeting the demand for high-quality afterschool programs. It establishes a Youth Development Council to study youth needs, review best practices in afterschool programming, and lay the groundwork for dramatically expanding and strengthening community efforts to provide safe, enriching and educational experiences for kids outside of school.

Voices played a key role in the ACT Now campaign that led to this law and is helping to guide its implementation.

Voices President Kathy Ryg urged the dinner audience to take bold moves,

informed by solid policy work and strong, long-term advocacy, to ensure continued victories for kids and families. "As I have

traveled around the state this year, I've met many outstanding leaders in our schools and communities. Like them, we must keep kids foremost as we advocate for adequate funding for

education from cradle to college. Our work is to make sure there are success stories like Iris' from neighborhoods and communities throughout Illinois."

The 2010 Kids Count Award honorees are Nicor Inc., for its Adventures in Reading program, and Frank M. Clark, chairman and CEO of ComEd, who co-founded the Rowe-Clark Math & Science Academy.



*Iris Lopez credits an afterschool program with helping her get on track to graduate*



## POVERTY AND OBESITY— TIME TO TAKE ACTION

Our state's kids—especially poor and minority kids—are getting heavier. Among Illinois youth aged 10 to 17, about 31 percent are overweight or obese. An alarming 56 percent of Illinois' publicly insured children—that is, low-income kids—are overweight or obese, the highest prevalence in the nation.

Broad social changes in our environment and in the way that we work, play and eat are major contributors to this epidemic.

Freeport's Voices Leadership Committee chose to focus its September 2010 Kids Count symposium on the pressing issue of poverty and obesity. Keynote speaker Lara Jaskiewicz, regional manager of the Public Health Institute of Metropolitan Chicago, talked about the relationship between obesity and such poverty-related factors as dangerous neighborhoods and lack of easy access to affordable and healthy food. Karen Berg, Illinois Alliance to Prevent Obesity consultant, and Dawn Melchiorre, Voices policy director, discussed the impact of the economic downturn on children's health. They highlighted data from *Illinois Kids Count 2010: Children and Families in a Time of Economic Crisis*.

People at the symposium were energized by the chance to participate in development of an "action roadmap" to increase access to healthy and affordable food, increase opportunities for physical exercise, and implement environmental changes to ensure a healthy future for Illinois. Ideas from forums around the state are being integrated into a State Obesity Action Roadmap, to be completed by the end of 2010.

Regional symposiums held in East St. Louis and Springfield focused on the long-term impact of the economic downturn and the core messages of Kids Count 2010: Children are our future. Investments in child well-being reap dividends later on. When poverty and hardship block children from striving, we all lose.



"As licensed foster and adoptive parents, my wife Julie and I both strongly support the welfare and well-being of foster kids and recognize the need to change the public perception of foster care," says Will Hobert, managing member of WH Trading and member of the UCAN President's Board. "That's just one reason why we applaud all of the good work that Voices does for kids."

Voices extends a special thank-you to the Hoberts for sponsoring its Associates Board's Sept. 29 Kids at Heart FUNdraiser, on a roof deck high above the Loop. In just one evening, the Associates Board raised a stunning \$12,000 to support Voices' advocacy for foster children and the families that care for them.

Treena Glover, a foster parent featured in the latest Foster Kids Are Our Kids public awareness campaign, spoke at the event, sharing touching and amusing stories about her life as a mother of one biological teenager and five foster children aged 3 to 11. "I want to be a vehicle for change for both the biological parents and the children," she said. "Strengthening the parent will ultimately strengthen the child."

The Associates Board, formed in early 2009, promotes the well-being of all children in Illinois through its support of Voices for Illinois Children. Board members are emerging leaders from various professions who share a passion for helping children grow up healthy, happy, safe, loved and well-educated. Members contribute in a variety of ways, from organizing fundraising events to sponsoring educational events that inform the broader public about key children's issues and policies that Voices champions.

**The Associates Board is looking to grow!  
For more information or to join, contact  
Dawn Melchiorre at  
dmelchiorre@voices4kids.org.**



# WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

The votes are in and some faces in state leadership are changing—but policymakers’ biggest challenge remains.

When the governor and General Assembly (including about 20 new legislators) take their oaths of office in January, they’ll face a state revenue shortfall of more than \$10 billion. It’s projected to swell to about \$16 billion in the fiscal year that begins next July, according to Voices’ Budget & Tax Policy Initiative.

At risk remain Illinois jobs and our efforts at economic recovery, which already are greatly harmed by significantly reduced investments in the learning, health and overall well-being of children and their families.

Education, public safety, and health and human services comprise more than 90 percent of the state operating budget, leaving little room to cut without further hurting our most important priorities—priorities that Illinoisans want to protect, according to statewide polls.

The size of our budget hole is expected to grow from second-worst in the country this year to worst next year, according to the national Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. It’s very likely that Illinois will face more borrowing and budget cuts—not to mention more unpaid bills—unless action is taken.

Problems this big demand the use of every policy tool available to us—a balanced approach that includes discussion of reforms, strategic spending restraints and the raising of more adequate revenues through modernization

of our outdated tax system. Without new, recurring revenues, our approach will remain out of balance, and kids and families will continue to face dire consequences due to:

- Non-strategic cuts that eliminate jobs in the private as well as public sector, not to mention vital services that provide families with stability, from early childhood and mental health programs to services for seniors and persons with disabilities.
- Payment delays to schools, units of local government and providers of crucial supports, which add to the loss of services and the jobs associated with them.
- Borrowing, which adds hundreds of millions of dollars to our annual debt.

Voices and our partner advocates for children plan to work with all state policymakers—new and veteran legislators—to

raise the profile of kids’ most important needs and the resources necessary to help families recover from the Great Recession.

We’ll continue reaching out to legislators from both sides of the aisle to emphasize the need for bipartisan cooperation in addressing our unprecedented crisis. The urgent need to restore our state to sound fiscal footing—and kids and families to stability—crosses partisan lines.

Keep an eye on [www.voices4kids.org](http://www.voices4kids.org) for opportunities to support these efforts—both in the weeks ahead and during the new General Assembly’s spring session.

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# BIRTH TO ~~5~~8: GROWING OUR CAPACITY

Only one-third of Illinois fourth-graders are proficient in reading and fewer than 40 percent are proficient in math, based on results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exam. Among low-income, African-American and Latino children, the scores are much worse. In fact, based on student performance and equity gaps, the Advance Illinois organization gives elementary and secondary education a “D.”

This is an urgent situation. In particular, many experts say reading at grade level by the end of third grade is a significant, nearly make-or-break 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 and unable to do basic math, they might not catch up to their peers.

At Voices we have for many years been focused on kindergarten readiness—for good reasons and with good success. Now, with substantial support from the McCormick Foundation and the Joyce Foundation, we are building on that experience and expanding our capacity to better address the entire birth-to-8 continuum of children’s learning and development.

We start with a forthcoming issue brief, *All Systems Go: Kids Ready for Success*, which outlines various challenges

and factors that contribute to success in school, ranging from the availability of high-quality preschool and challenging curricula to social-emotional learning supports and high-quality teachers, and beyond. You can read it at [www.voices4kids.org](http://www.voices4kids.org).

Next, the Kids Count 2011 report and related activities will expand public knowledge and awareness about the needs of children from birth to 8. Look for the data book, *Development of the Whole Child: Birth to 8*, in February. It will present statistics on a range of measures covering the entire birth-to-8 continuum of children’s learning and development.

The Chicago Kids Count symposium on March 4 will launch an exploration of what works in getting kids, families, schools, and communities to the point at which all children are proficient in reading and math and ready to learn by no later than fourth grade.

Over the next year, there will be new opportunities to tell us how you think Illinois can become a “ready state”—one in which families, communities and the entire educational system are ready to support the education and healthy development of all young children. We invite you to be part of the process, as we shape a policy agenda for Illinois that will ensure that every child can succeed in school and participate productively in the 21st century economy.



## Champions for Kids Wanted!

Sign up to raise pledges for the

**WRIGLEY START EARLY RUN AND WALK**

**April 2011**

Champions of all sizes, shapes and athletic ability welcomed.

For more information, contact Shawn Gavin at [sgavin@voices4kids.org](mailto:sgavin@voices4kids.org) or 312-516-5552



## TELL CONGRESS: EXTEND TAX CUTS, JOB-CREATION EFFORTS FOR ILLINOIS FAMILIES

**D**uring the economic downturn, provisions of the federal American Recovery & Reinvestment Act (ARRA) have provided an important cushion for struggling families. Now, with unemployment still high, those supports for low- and moderate-income, working families are about to expire—unless Congress acts quickly after returning to work in mid-November.

Voices has been talking with Illinois members of Congress about the need to extend:

- **2001 and 2003 tax cuts for middle-income families only.** Tax cuts for the wealthiest 2 percent of households should be allowed to expire. Keeping those expensive cuts in place is the least-effective of a dozen options the Congressional Budget Office studied for promoting growth and creating jobs.
- **Improvements in the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC).** Families of 324,000 Illinois children have benefited from a two-year reduction of the “marriage penalty” that occurs when EITC recipients marry and receive less help than they did as single-filers. ARRA also increased by about \$600 the maximum EITC amount for families with three or more children, affecting 418,000 Illinois children of low-income working parents.
- **Improvements in the Child Tax Credit (CTC).** ARRA temporarily lowered to \$3,000 the annual earnings level at which low-income families can begin

receiving this credit. If the change were allowed to lapse, the eligibility threshold would return to nearly \$13,000 and 732,000 Illinois children would lose some or all of their CTC help.

- **Emergency Contingency Fund of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).** This fund has helped over 25,000 people find jobs through Put Illinois To Work efforts.

Low- and moderate-income families generally do not bank the money they save from tax cuts and credits. They spend this money on food, clothes, rent and other necessities—investing their dollars in the local economy, helping to create jobs.

Federal lawmakers may also soon take up reauthorization of child-nutrition initiatives that help ensure that kids have access to healthy foods at school and other places where they gather. A current proposal hinges partly upon shifting resources from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance

Program (food stamps); if that happens, we must ensure those dollars are restored soon. With both child hunger and child obesity on the rise, availability of healthy food is a cause we can all get behind.

Contact your U.S. representatives and senators today to let them know you support extension of these vital supports for Illinois children and families. Keep an eye on Voices’ website—[www.voices4kids.org](http://www.voices4kids.org)—for updates.

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## PNC INVESTS IN CHICAGO

**“At PNC we believe that high-quality early education and school readiness initiatives are vital to children’s long-term success. And, like Voices, we know that these investments will help children experience greater educational achievements and be more successful later in life.”**

—Joseph Gregoire, PNC Illinois president and former Voices for Illinois Children board member



PNC Bank, a new corporate partner in Chicago, has put its stake in the ground with its Grow Up Great initiative focusing on school readiness. After many months of planning and consultation with experts, including Voices for Illinois Children, in September PNC launched Grow Up Great in Chicago. The emphasis is on inquiry-based math and science education for underserved preschoolers in programs run by Chicago Public Schools and the Big Shoulders Fund.

Grow Up Great takes advantage of Chicago’s world-class science institutions—Adler Planetarium, Field Museum, Museum of Science and Industry, and Shedd Aquarium. The partners, which are receiving \$3 million from PNC, will establish new programs in science for preschoolers, provide professional development in teaching the subject for preschool teachers, and engage parents through participation in classroom activities and family visits to the partner institutions. This project is expected to serve over 1,000 preschoolers and their families. In addition, PNC has donated 40,000 Math is Everywhere learning kits to every preschool child in CPS and Big Shoulders programs.

Voices congratulates PNC as a continuing partner in helping every Illinois child grow up prepared to succeed in school and the global economy. For more information, visit [www.pncgrowupgreat.com](http://www.pncgrowupgreat.com)

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