

“We need to create one birth-to-eight system, not ‘bright spots’ of excellence.”



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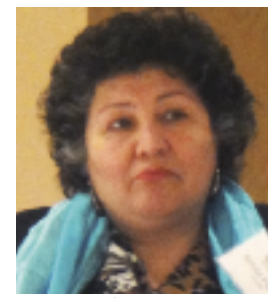
VOICES

BUILDING BETTER LIVES

“Our goal must be that children are born as healthy as possible, that we keep them as healthy as possible, and that we deal with any problems as early as possible,” said Gabel. “Healthy babies grow into healthy children ready to learn.” She noted that the legislature, faced with tough choices, would be using an outcome-based budgeting process this year—and that investing in early childhood has proven, long-term returns in better academic and employment results and reduced involvement in the criminal justice system.



State Representative Robyn Gabel with Kathy Ryg at Kids Count Symposium 2011



“We need to invest in maintaining and nurturing strong Latino families.”

—Sylvia Puente

Puente talked of the “Latino paradox”—Mexican-American children have health outcomes and social-emotional skills similar to those of white children, although a much higher percentage of Latino children live in low-income households. “Cultural norms translate into better nutrition, more intact families, and better discipline,” she said. Unfortunately, this paradox does not translate into greater academic achievement or apply in the second and later generations. There is a widening gap between the achievement of young Latino and white children, which speaks to the need both to enroll more Latino children in preschool and to invest in maintaining strong Latino families.

Slaughter described the McCormick Foundation’s recent evolution from focusing on birth-to-5 issues to embracing the whole birth-to-8 continuum, based on research, common sense, and the opportunity to bridge several worlds—preschool and K-12 education, cognitive and social-emotional skills, health and education. “We need to create one birth-to-8 system, not ‘bright spots’ of excellence,” she concluded, urging advocates not to give up hope even during these difficult times.



“These are dark days but there have been darker ones. Seize the dark days and build bridges.”

—Sara Slaughter

Close to 300 people attended the Chicago Kids Count Symposium. Check the Voices website for information about regional symposiums to be held later in the year.

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By fourth grade, children are expected to be able to read fluently, understand and apply new concepts, set realistic goals, maintain friendships, and reflect on their own behavior.

How do they get there? Why are so many of them lagging behind national standards? And how do we build a sound foundation so that every child can be “Great at Eight”?

In February, with the publication of *Illinois Kids Count 2011: “Great at Eight: Investing in the Whole Child from Birth to Eight,”* Voices launched



a new initiative. Representing an ambitious new chapter for Voices, this effort builds on our strong, birth-to-5 foundation with increasing emphasis on the learning and developmental needs of children 5 to 8.

This initiative, with generous support from the McCormick Foundation, the

Joyce Foundation and PNC Bank, will increase Voices’ capacity to take on a wide range of issues during the birth-to-8 years.

We will be asking parents and concerned citizens throughout the state to weigh in on the question, “How do we best use resources to improve

children’s learning and development?” We invite you to be part of the process as we shape a stronger policy agenda for Illinois that will ensure that every child is ready to learn and participate productively in a rapidly changing world.



To download or request *Illinois Kids Count 2011: “Great at Eight,”* visit www.voices4kids.org

Join the Voices online advocacy network at www.voices4kids.org

The Smart Choice: Investing in Kids Today



Listen to what Nobel Prize-winning economists are saying:

“Early development of human capital results in greater economic returns—for individuals and society.”—James Heckman

“What’s supposed to happen when today’s neglected children become tomorrow’s work force?”—Paul Krugman, “Leaving Children Behind,” *New York Times*, February 27

We urge policymakers to pay attention to these economists and other experts as they make tough budget decisions at the federal and state levels. The first years of life—from birth to 8—are critical. Reading achievement at fourth grade is an important predictor of high school graduation rates, future earnings potential and adult health outcomes. Services for young children should be spared from budget cuts to reduce the need for costly remediation and social services when the children are older.

In *Illinois Kids Count 2011*, we are reminded that children are already paying too high a price due to the economic recession. Child poverty jumped from 17 percent in 2008 to 19 percent in 2009. Poverty rates are higher for children under age 6 and for minorities. An alarming 45 percent of African-American children under 6 live in poverty, in families making \$15,000-\$20,000 a year.

Schools, in particular, are feeling the effects. Children from low-income families (earning less than twice the federal poverty level) made up 45 percent of public school enrollment in fall 2009—up from 37 percent a decade ago. In some large districts throughout the state, low-income enrollment tops 70 percent.

Class sizes are increasing, about 8,000 children lost access to pre-kindergarten in the last two years, and mental health services for children are being cut dramatically. These are all shortsighted solutions to the budget crisis.

Our children must be able to “read to learn” at fourth grade. That means that, as a state, we must be smart about how to spend our limited resources. Let’s listen to the economists and invest in educational and developmental resources for our children—all our children. It’s the right and wise thing to do.

— Kathy Ryg
President



GREAT AT EIGHT: Investing in the Whole Child from Birth to Eight

Illinois Kids Count 2011 was launched on February 17 with great enthusiasm via news conferences throughout the state. Communities hosting well-attended launch events—featuring education, business, law enforcement and other community leaders—included Freeport, the Quad Cities, Naperville, Joliet, Champaign, Springfield, Quincy, East St. Louis and Carterville. Special thanks to Voices board members Joyce Smith, Bonnie Wheeler, Sue Swisher and Tracy Johnson for their leadership in organizing events in their communities.

In Quincy, Chaddock School President Debbie Reed said that data compiled in the report helps schools better serve students. “We really use this information to help identify where there are needs, to build a case for why a program or service might be needed, and then to find funding for that service,” said Reed.

The increase in child poverty likely will have a long-term impact on children’s development and achievement, according to some news-conference speakers. In Springfield, Morgan County Sheriff Randy Duvendack said it is important to invest in children when they’re young rather than spend taxpayer money incarcerating them when they’re older: “We know that there are a lot of parents who are struggling themselves. They’re struggling financially; they’re also struggling emotionally. Somehow, we have to step up and make sure the kids have opportunities.”

Will County Superintendent of Schools Dr. Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant said that for some children school is the most stable environment they are in all day. “It’s critical to encourage love of learning at this age to encourage learning later,” she said. Bertino-Tarrant emphasized contacting state legislators to encourage funds for early childhood programs to stay intact. “We need to make sure legislators hear the need to keep spending where it matters most—with our children,” she said.

The Kids Count project is supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Bank of America Merrill Lynch. We thank them for their support but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in the report are those of Voices for Illinois Children alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of these organizations.

USING RESEARCH TO INFORM PUBLIC POLICY: KIDS COUNT 2011 SYMPOSIUM



Ruby Takanishi at Kids Count Symposium

“We are eating our seed corn—losing the future of millions of American children by disinvesting in them,” said keynote Ruby Takanishi at the Kids Count Symposium on March 4. Takanishi, President of the national Foundation for Child Development, pointed out that there is a clear correlation between investments in children and outcomes. Countries that invest more resources in the preschool years have better third-grade outcomes.

Takanishi urged listeners to get back to basic principles to guide advocacy for children.

First, she said, the future of children is our future, not only children’s future. What every parent wants for his or her child is what every child should have. This principle leads naturally to the breakdown of “us” and “them” thinking, and to advocacy for more adequate and equitable provision of services such as health care and preschool education.

Second, advocacy must be focused. We must set priorities on what matters most for children growing up in American society.

Third, children’s health status and educational achievement are closely related. Savings result when we focus “upstream.” For example, it is 10 times as costly to treat a premature infant as to provide prenatal care.

Fourth, we must be informed and guided by evidence about children’s development and deep reflection on our experience.

We know that poverty hurts children, Takanishi con-

cluded. And we know that certain policies reduce child poverty. She urged child advocates to remember the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., “The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

PANEL: HOW DO WE ENSURE CHILDREN HAVE THE RESOURCES TO BE GREAT AT EIGHT?

Shannon Christian, Director of the Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development, introduced the symposium panelists: Robyn Gabel, 18th District State Representative; Christopher Koch, Superintendent, Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE); Sylvia Puente, Executive Director, Latino Policy Forum; and Sara Slaughter, Director of the Education Program at the McCormick Foundation.

Panelists spoke against the backdrop of the current threat to Illinois’ long-term progress in building resources for children during the crucial, birth-to-8 years. Koch stressed the need for a collaborative approach at a time when the state is still weathering the recession and child poverty is increasing. ISBE is doing its best to allocate its too-little funding on a timely basis, but the state is \$1.2 billion in arrears to schools and “we can’t tell when that will get better,” he said.

continued on page 4

KEY FINDINGS FROM ILLINOIS KIDS COUNT 2011

- Reading achievement among Illinois children at the beginning of fourth grade has improved only modestly, and wide disparities remain among racial-ethnic groups and between low-income students and other students.
- Participation in state-funded pre-K programs increased 70 percent between fiscal years 2003 and 2009, but declined in FY 2010 as a result of budget cuts.
- The recession has led to a sharp rise in child poverty in both Illinois and the U.S. as a whole. Poverty rates are expected to continue climbing even after unemployment subsides.
- Low-income children are more likely to have chronic health problems and are at greater risk for developmental delays. They are more likely to be affected by family stress and less likely to live in safe and supportive neighborhoods.
- The state fiscal crisis threatens to erode important investments in early childhood education and care, health insurance coverage, children’s mental health services, and other essential programs and services.