Mandy Luczak, Katie Ward and Jessica Villie collected donations to help their Marengo school, which is facing budget cuts.
From either of the most-accepted vantage points, our progress in ending child poverty in Illinois is not good enough. The National Center for Children in Poverty’s new report shows 37 percent of all our state’s children living in low-income households. The Census Bureau – which uses the more traditional but clearly outdated federal poverty guidelines – still finds over 500,000 of our children (or 17 percent) growing up poor.

We know the consequences of growing up in poverty. Children who grow up poor are more likely to face a number of difficulties, like learning disabilities and developmental delays. As they grow older, these children are more likely to drop out of school, have babies in their teens and be unemployed.

Why not put this question at the top of our policy list and adopt a deliberate plan to end child poverty during the next 20 years?

Six years ago, England decided to eliminate child poverty by 2020. The federal government formulated and embraced the challenge and engaged a broad range of community organizations, businesses and individuals in the initiative, which includes a specific timeline and measurable goals. Policies focus on ensuring that economic growth is reaching the poorest families by boosting incomes, providing affordable child care, preparing children for school, and improving family supports such as affordable housing and job training. Though the effort missed its first interim goal of a 25 percent reduction by 2005, child poverty was actually reduced by 17 percent. That’s 700,000 fewer English children living in poverty in just five years.

America is characterized by our ability and willingness to tackle big challenges. We abolished slavery and sent the first men into space. We drastically reduced poverty among the elderly with Social Security and Medicare. Ending child poverty can be our next big challenge, one that has already been taken up by a few states, including Connecticut and Minnesota.

It’s a goal that aligns with the Illinois Constitution (adopted by voters in 1970), which includes “eliminate poverty and inequality” as one of its purposes in the preamble. It’s a goal that would make a powerful difference for more than a million of our children. And it’s a goal that touches the heart of the work of Voices for Illinois Children and of all of us who care about children.

So what should be our goal? Will it take us a generation to end child poverty? Two generations? Once we have a goal, we can set strategies and a timeline, and we can measure our progress with benchmarks. There is strong, bipartisan support in Illinois for a number of strategies that address child poverty: quality preschool, tax credits for working families, after-school and reading programs, health care.

Whatever it takes, we need to do it. Our children need this. We all need this. Let’s make it happen. As architect Daniel Burnham said, “Make no small plans. They have no magic to stir humanity’s blood and probably themselves will not be realized. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work.”

**Our Mission**

Voices for Illinois Children champions the full development of every child in Illinois to assure the future well-being of the people of the state. We work with families, communities and policymakers to ensure that all children grow up healthy, nurtured, safe and well-educated.
IMPROVING SERVICES FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

By Dawn Melchiorre and Sean Noble

Thousands of young children in Illinois struggle with developmental delays or disabilities, and thousands more are at risk of such problems. Fortunately, almost 17,000 of these children find help and hope through the Early Intervention (EI) system.

EI provides vital developmental services for these youngest and most vulnerable of Illinoisans, from birth to age 3, who have a variety of diagnoses including autism and cerebral palsy. Supports range from speech and physical therapy to developmental and occupational therapy – federally mandated services that are critical to the healthy growth of the children for whom they’re prescribed. These services, provided during children’s earliest years of life, are crucial as these youngsters prepare for school. They also help parents learn to better support their children’s development.

Yet, much like the children who depend upon them, these services face health issues of their own. Caseloads are growing faster than the system can keep up, and a $3 million increase this year only sustains current caseloads – it does not keep pace with increasing needs. Many areas of Illinois lack qualified therapists to serve the needs of this vulnerable population. Overall, such problems are exacerbated by the low rates paid to therapists and other service providers who contract with the state to help youngsters who need them.

In fact, EI providers have gone six years without even a basic, cost-of-doing-business increase, even as their costs have continued to rise. Theirs was among a handful of vital social-service programs that were not given such increases in either the FY2006 or FY2007 state budgets. Programs that did receive overdue, cost-of-doing-business increase are extremely important, including Teen REACH, Healthy Families Illinois and Crisis Nurseries. Yet EI supports are no less critical to children’s well-being, and deserve similar attention.

Children’s advocates will pursue cost-of-doing-business help for EI and a number of other social services in the weeks to come, perhaps as early as the legislature’s November veto session. Voices for Illinois Children also is studying and will pursue other, wider-ranging policy improvements to ensure a stronger and more accessible system of EI services for the young children who need them. Watch Voices’ website at www.voices4kids.org for updates.

For more information, contact Dawn Melchiorre or Sean Noble at 312-456-0600.
Under my administration, we have increased education funding from the state by more than $3.8 billion over the past three plus years, which is more than my predecessor increased education funding during his entire term and more than his predecessor increased education funding in nearly his first seven years. This includes increasing funding for preschool by nearly $30 million a year for the last three years. I recently signed an initiative that would make Illinois the only state in the nation to provide access to preschool for every 3- and 4-year-old child. My budget included $45 million for my Preschool for All plan, which puts Illinois on the path to providing high-quality preschool to every 3- and 4-year-old child in the state. More than ever before, the state’s resources are being targeted to school districts and children who need it the most. I also increased high school graduation standards for the first time in nearly 25 years.

This year’s budget also included a $48 million increase for higher education. Universities will receive more than $18 million to attract and retain the best faculty, and community college grants will increase by almost $7 million.

3. How would you promote the physical health and mental well-being of Illinois children and their families?

I believe that access to affordable, quality health care is one of the greatest issues facing citizens in Illinois. Since I became Governor, we have been able to provide health care coverage for over 400,000 more working families and children through the expansion of FamilyCare and KidCare. Also, under my All Kids legislation all children in Illinois will have access to affordable, accessible health insurance. I have also made improving women’s health a priority and have created and funded programs to help women receive breast cancer, ovarian, and other health screenings.

“Ensuring that our children have every resource and opportunity has been a one of my top priorities as Governor. I have expanded access to health care through the FamilyCare, KidCare and All Kids programs. I have added more new money for education than any other governor, and recently unveiled a bold new education plan that will add even more.”
ON CHILDREN’S ISSUES

how they would support children and their families. Their responses are printed here in full.

that does not endorse any candidate for public office.

Judy Baar Topinka

1. As governor, how would your administration respond to and promote the needs of children and their families?

As Governor, I will make the needs of children and families a priority. I will work with you and other stakeholders and maintain an open dialogue with you. I will appoint a Deputy Governor for Children and Families, responsible for developing and implementing a shared vision for children and family services across multiple state agencies. I will also create a Children and Families Cabinet responsible for creating strategic goals for children and family policy, building a long-term commitment to children and family issues, identifying new resources for programs serving children and families, and creating community-based solutions for addressing these problems.

I recently presented a children’s safety plan that proposes increasing quality child care options, cracking down on child predators and sex offenders – including improved monitoring and public notification – and combating the growing methamphetamine problem in Illinois. I also proposed a family health initiative to address such issues as the growing child obesity problem, stem cell research, and better access to quality health care professionals for women and children.

I have supported efforts of the last three governors to expand health care for children, particularly needy children and children of the working poor. My principal difference with the governor on AllKids is his opposition to an eligibility income cap. I would implement a cap of $100,000. It is not right that families earning $30,000 and $40,000 are subsidizing the health care of families making $150,000 or more. I also support early childhood education and my Education Plan includes funds for preschool.

2. How would you ensure that all children have the opportunity for a quality education, starting from their earliest years and continuing through college age?

I am a strong supporter of early childhood education. In my Education Plan, I include large funding increases for preschool in each of the next six years. I will ramp up preschool funding and ensure Illinois has quality preschool programs and qualified teachers.

I will increase the foundation level by $1,000 during the next four years and $1,725 over the next six years. It is important to focus new public dollars on the foundation level because it helps needy schools and those serving large concentrations of children living in poverty. The Blagojevich Administration has cut state reading programs; I will increase reading grants by $100 million. Illinois has too many children not reading at grade level, and specialized reading programs work. My plan also creates a new $250 million Accountability Block Grant to improve student achievement.

Illinois has not had a new school construction program under Rod Blagojevich. I will work with legislative leaders to fund school construction. I have proposed a record-setting $3 billion school construction program. It would leverage a total of $6 billion for new schools.

“I will create a Children and Families Cabinet responsible for creating strategic goals for children and family policy, building a long-term commitment to children and family issues, identifying new resources for programs serving children and families, and creating community-based solutions for addressing these problems.”

continued on page 06
an cancer and cervical cancer screenings and treatment. We have been able to help Illinois residents without prescription drug coverage get more affordable drugs from Canada, England and Ireland through the I-Save Rx program. I also proposed rules that would ban the sale of junk food and soda in Illinois schools.

I have also worked to expand mental health coverage. I signed the Children’s Mental Health Act of 2003 which created a substantive and strategic plan for building an effective children’s mental health system to address prevention, early intervention and treatment for children from birth to age 18. I also helped create the Mental Health Partnership and recently signed legislation that requires the state provide children in its custody mental health services in areas such as trauma, substance abuse, developmental disabilities and integrated assessment.

4. How would you strengthen the economic security of Illinois families, helping them to raise their children in supportive households?

While Illinois’ economy is continuing to rebound, I am working to make sure every Illinois citizen has economic security. I inherited an economy that was hemorrhaging jobs, and we have managed to turn things around. Since January 2004, Illinois has gained 118,600 new jobs – more new jobs than any Midwest state. Site Selection magazine recently ranked Illinois third in attracting new corporate facilities, and Business Facilities magazine named Illinois the top state for biotechnology growth, an industry that will provide the kind of high-paying jobs we will need in the future. Illinois exports increased nearly 19 percent in 2005 – the greatest increase in more than 10 years. The tourism industry, which supports almost 300,000 jobs in our state, generated $24.5 billion in 2004, a nearly 7 percent increase. And 450,000 people also got a 26 percent raise when we increased the minimum wage to $6.50 an hour, exceeding the federal standard.

One of my first acts as Governor was to raise the minimum wage from $5.15 an hour to $6.50 an hour. This benefited over 200,000 hard-working Illinois families. If re-elected, I have pledged to raise the minimum wage another dollar to $7.50 an hour.

I am also working hard to help single-parent-headed households. Child support collection was and remains a priority in my administration. Last year alone, we collected a record $1.14 billion of child support, a 20 percent increase over the last administration and an 11 percent increase from last year.

5. How would you ensure a sound state-revenue footing to support the schools, health care and other vital social services that are crucial to the well-being of children and families?

Four years ago, in the face of a $5 billion deficit and with an Illinois economy that had lost almost 250,000 jobs in the previous three years before I came into office, I balanced the budget through a series of tough budget cuts and by reducing the size of state government by over 13,000 workers. If I am re-elected I will continue to find ways to do more for less, to improve health care, increase education funding and support our children and other vital services.

I’ve done it – and will continue to do it if re-elected – without increasing the income tax or sales tax. With the economy performing well, revenue growth is strong, which will help us continue to invest in critical priorities like education, health care and children’s welfare.
One of the first and most important things I will do to promote the physical health of Illinois children is to address the obesity problem. Obesity is quickly becoming the largest health crisis facing children and families, and the state needs to lead on the issue. I will assemble a blue ribbon panel to identify real solutions to issues such as getting children more active, improving nutrition at school, and incorporating healthy lifestyle education into the curriculum.

Illinois also needs to do a better job preventing unhealthy births among low-income families. Annually, a staggering 25,000 Medicaid babies, one-third of all Medicaid births, are born unhealthy. I will implement an aggressive “Healthy Babies Campaign” to address this problem.

Illinois needs to refocus resources on the health of needy children. I support the AllKids program and will continue the program if elected. Unlike the governor, I have a four-year budget plan that shows how I will fully fund the program. My concern about AllKids is that it has no income cap. This dilutes the state’s ability to focus its limited resources on needy children. A $100,000 income cap will ensure state dollars are used for those who truly need help.

Illinois needs to make a greater investment in children’s mental health programs. The current $5 million appropriation is insufficient. I will increase the annual appropriation to $17 million over the next four years. This commitment will help keep more troubled children in school and teach them the skills necessary to succeed.

4. How would you strengthen the economic security of Illinois families, helping them to raise their children in supportive households?

For families to have economic security, they must have jobs – good-paying jobs with benefits. A disturbing development in Illinois during the last couple of years is that family income has been declining. According to a report by Northern Illinois University and the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability, family income decreases in Illinois have been triple the national average for the same period. Adjusting for inflation, the buying power of the average Illinois family is now the same as it was in 1989. This may be the first time since World War II that family income in Illinois has fallen.

Illinois is losing jobs and failing to create new ones at a sufficient rate. During Rod Blagojevich’s administration, Illinois has ranked among the bottom 10 states in job growth. Many of the lost jobs have been good-paying jobs with benefits, while most of the jobs created have been low-wage jobs without benefits.

I have presented a comprehensive plan detailing how Illinois can address the jobs problem, focusing on good-paying jobs with benefits. In that plan, I outline how Illinois can attract new businesses and new jobs to Illinois. A key component of my plan is the creation of incentives for employers to create higher-quality jobs that provide health care, retirement and other benefits for Illinois workers. I will also reform the state’s approach to job creation, creating a public-private partnership known as the Illinois Jobs Partnership, whose primary focus will be the retention and creation of good jobs for Illinoisans.

5. How would you ensure a sound state-revenue footing to support the schools, health care and other vital social services that are crucial to the well-being of children and families?

My four-year budget plan explains the budgetary pressures Illinois is facing and how I would balance the budget during the next four years. It will require budget cuts, fiscal management and new revenue.

I would eliminate no-bid contracts, 400 political positions created by the Blagojevich administration and millions of dollars in pork barrel spending. I would implement management practices to slow the growth in Medicaid spending. Medicaid is growing at 8 percent a year, which is three times the rate of inflation or twice the rate of state revenue growth.

Education is no longer the largest item in the budget; Medicaid is – at 27 percent. If we do not get Medicaid under control, it will eat up the budget and leave few dollars for education and other human service priorities. Notwithstanding the governor’s scare tactics, I will increase Medicaid funding by $1.2 billion over the next four years, and no one currently eligible for Medicaid will be removed from Medicaid. My administration will protect health care coverage for senior citizens and children.

Even with cuts and better management, the state will need new revenue for pensions, education, infrastructure and human services. One valuable revenue source would be placing the tenth casino license in Chicago. This license has been dormant for a decade and the state has lost billions of dollars. The Chicago casino and new gaming positions would raise $1.2 billion annually. My entire package would pay state bills to health care providers, increase education funding, pay for pensions and fund health care for children and families.
A new language came to me in reading Stephanie Pace Marshall’s new book, “The Power to Transform: Leadership that Brings Learning and Schooling to Life.” It was as if my awareness had expanded; I see things differently now.

Her book illuminates the power of story to shape human behavior, as it engagingly tells “a radical new story of learning and schooling.” She uses the term “story” to refer to that set of beliefs, assumptions and images that are the context (or landscape) for learning. And the “landscape” is navigated by a “map” of meaning-filled ways of learning, ways based on the principles of living systems everywhere that naturally organize for sustainability.

Dr. Marshall is an experienced, highly credentialed national and international leader, a pioneer with a brilliant track record as founder and president of the acclaimed Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy in Aurora. She was the keynote speaker at Voices for Illinois Children’s annual Kids Count Awards Dinner on Oct. 6.

“The Power to Transform” argues that “by focusing on reforming the contents of schooling and not transforming the context and conditions of learning, we have created false proxies for learning and eroded the potentially vibrant intellectual life of our schools. Finishing a course and a textbook has come to mean achievement.

Listening to a lecture has come to mean understanding. Getting a high score on a standardized test has come to mean proficiency. Credenting has come to mean competence.” The book is about an entirely different concept of learning and schooling than the one most of us have experienced or thought possible.

The book outlines four fundamental and integrated “truths:”

1. Children are born learning and each child possesses a unique constellation of potentials for brilliance, resilience, imagination, clarity and creativity that must be intentionally activated.

2. We, their community, are collectively responsible for creating the context and conditions within which children’s potentials are ignited and liberated.

3. Our community’s dominant narrative – the story we tell about our children and ourselves as a community – “embodies our worldview, identity, purpose and sense of belonging,” and that story defines what we become.

4. Our current narrative is grounded in deficiency and fragmentation, not abundance or wholeness.

There’s something both sobering and hopeful here, but rather than take a posture of shock and disappointment at how we are performing, let’s navigate the principles and the opportunities they raise for reshaping the landscape of learning and schooling.

Learning children – Children’s learning is a dynamic process of constructing meaning, matching and creating new patterns and connections, they alone determine and construct interdependently with their environment. Learning is the process of living, organic systems characterized by abundance, wholeness, interdependence and creative exploration. This is in contrast to the current view of schooling that learning is an externally driven and prescribed process of passively acquiring information. As a result, Marshall writes, “our children have become schooling-disabled in a learning-abundant world.” She elaborates on these two learning processes – one of deep, integral learning and the other of shallow, reductive learning – and argues that to activate children’s multi-dimensional intelligences and potentials we must reconnect learning to life and invite our children and our systems to learn as life does.

Caring community – When seen this way, most of society wants to honor our children and their natural gifts, and activate
and liberate their potentials. We try to act in accord with these values and aspirations, but the obstacles often seem insurmountable. How can so many good intentions, reforms and expenditures continue to shape learners unequal to the challenges and opportunities of our time? The book answers that question by showing how we unintentionally create and choose to live a story of deficiency: a deficiency of leadership, a deficiency of systems, and a deficiency of our children. “Within a community there is no such thing as a random comment; every comment is part of an unfolding pattern or story,” Marshall writes. We become the story we tell about ourselves. It establishes the context to which our compasses are set.

Our story – The book helps us examine the assumptions and beliefs that inform the story we are living. With cognitive research to back her up, and grounded in practical “how tos” for the educators among us, Marshall demystifies education for our time by describing the principles and means to transform learning, rather than reform schools. Rather than focusing on mechanistic tinkering of our educational systems and framing learning as reductive and prescriptive, she focuses on the context, using a different framework of beliefs, assumptions and principles. Her proven approach “immerses children in meaning, not memory; engagement, not transmission; inquiry, not compliance; exploration, not acquisition; personalization, not uniformity; interdependence, not individualism; collaboration, not competition; and trust, not fear.”

Marshall succeeds in what she set out to do, to articulate what it takes to “create a generative and life-affirming system of learning and schooling that liberates the goodness and genius of all children and invites and nurtures the power and creativity of the human spirit for the world.” She says who we are willing to be on this journey will make the critical difference because “we cannot create what we have not become.”

Our children are the elders of the future, and their wisdom must contend with that unknowable time. Their capability will depend upon the quality and nature of their minds. “The Power to Transform” stirs us to explore, create, design and tell a new story, one worthy of our children. Its message is a long-awaited beacon and treasure for our communities, families and school systems.

Lynn Montei is Vice Chair of Voices for Illinois Children’s Board of Directors.

Did the articles you read move you? Do you want to know how you can make a difference for children and families? Visit www.voices4kids.org to find out how to:

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**GIRLS BREAK OPEN PIGGY BANK TO RAISE MONEY FOR STRUGGLING SCHOOLS**

By Jim and Sharon McGowan

*Editor’s note: This article is part of a regular series of stories that illustrate how students and communities across Illinois are affected by the state’s school-funding system.*

When the three fifth-graders learned that some of their favorite teachers had been let go and that the sports activities they love might be eliminated, they decided to take matters into their own hands. The girls, students at Riley Elementary School in far west suburban Marengo, told their parents that they were going for a walk, and then went door to door in their neighborhood soliciting contributions for their school.

“We thought whatever we could give would help a little,” said Jessica Villie, 11. “We did it on our own. We didn’t have any paperwork or anything, so some people wouldn’t give anything. Others understood what we were doing and gave something.”

The girls’ one-school K-8 district is broke. Riley District 18, with about 300 students, is $1.2 million in debt on a budget of $2.5 million. The district has been on the state’s financial watch list for the past two years and is expected to be on the list next year, Supt. Ronald Rood said.

Jessica and her friends, Mandy Luczak and Katie Ward, raised about $200, some of which came from their own piggy banks. Rood said he was surprised when the girls told him about their efforts, adding that although their impromptu fundraising was unauthORIZED, the girls’ hearts were in the right place.

Their parents were proud of the youngsters’ activism. “These are three outspoken girls. They take school seriously,” said Sue Villie, Jessica’s mother.

The question now is whether the girls’ actions will inspire residents of Riley District 18 to dig into their own piggy banks to increase the education fund tax rate in the November referendum. District 18’s tax rate ranks last of nine elementary districts in McHenry County.

Three-quarters of District 18’s revenues come from local property taxes, well above the statewide average of 57 percent. This is prompting
Elizabeth Rosenberg is senior administrator to the president of Rush-Presbyterian-St. Luke’s Medical Center in Chicago, where she designs and implements business performance plans in clinical and research areas. She previously ran a health care consulting business, served as vice president of primary care at Macneal Health Network in Berwyn and held management positions at a variety of companies. Ms. Rosenberg is a graduate of The Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard College in Cambridge, Mass. She lives in Oak Park.

Dr. Mark Rosenberg is a community pediatrician who practices in Chicago. He is past president of the Illinois chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics and represents the American Academy of Pediatrics on the Committee on Federal Government Affairs. A graduate of the University of Iowa, The Chicago Medical School and Loyola University of Chicago, Dr. Rosenberg has received a number of awards, including Pediatrician of the Year in 2003. He is Assistant Professor of Pediatrics, Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. In addition to advocacy on child health issues, Dr. Rosenberg has worked with the AAP on early child development and children.
2006 KIDS COUNT AWARDS DINNER

Voices President Jerry Stermer, honoree Marjorie Craig Benton and Charles Benton.

Marlene Richman, honoree Harold Richman and featured speaker Stephanie Pace Marshall.

Joe Gregoire of National City Bank, state Senator Kwame Raoul and state Senator Don Harmon.

Voices President Jerry Stermer, Alice Phillips and Bryan Samuels, director of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services.