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**Local Advocacy Groups Respond to Illinois Designation as a “Best Chance” State  
for Early Childhood Programs**

*New report ranks state-funded pre-kindergarten programs for access and quality*

CHICAGO, IL –Illinois policymakers’ commitment to invest in early childhood programs helped rate Illinois fourth in a national ranking of “best chance” states for parents seeking a high-quality, state-funded preschool program for their children. And while local child advocacy groups Voices for Illinois Children, the Ounce of Prevention Fund, and Illinois Action for Children applaud the prestigious ranking, they note that more work must be done to expand early childhood programs statewide.

“Votes Count: Legislative Action on Pre-K Fiscal Year 2009” is a state-by-state analysis of early childhood funding, released today by Pre-K Now with support from The Pew Charitable Trusts. Illinois placed behind Oklahoma, West Virginia and Arkansas in the ratings. The report also ranks Illinois among 32 states that are increasing investments in early childhood programs, a central effort of the governor and supportive lawmakers during the past several years.

In addition, the report recognized the success of Illinois’s sweeping Preschool for All program established in 2006. Illinois is currently the only state phasing-in access for all 3- and 4-year-olds whose parents want it.

Using data available at the time, the groups determined that Preschool for All served an estimated 27 percent of all 4 year olds and 19 percent of all 3 year olds in the state in 2006-2007. Operated in 78 percent of school districts state-wide, the program meets nine of the National Institute for Early Education’s 10 benchmarks for quality, including requirements that teachers have bachelor’s degrees and specialized training in early childhood.

The three advocacy groups say that the ‘for-all’ phase-in process was supposed to be completed by FY 2011, but insufficient funding levels in 2008 and 2009 have hampered efforts to bring the program to scale by that deadline. Even with new resources approved over the past several years, Illinois remains at least \$28 million shy of funding targets initially envisioned for Preschool for All, underscoring the need for still more legislative focus on the early years.

“Advocates in Illinois are very encouraged that more children have access to the quality programs they deserve,” said Jerry Stermer, president, Voices for Illinois Children. “We need to remember, though, that there are still too many families who qualify for and desire this same opportunity for their children. ‘Preschool for All’ is our commitment to Illinois children, and we need to reach the goal of ‘for all.’”

“Quality early childhood experiences prepare our youngest learners for a lifetime of learning, as well as provides them the appropriate socialization and classroom skills that will make a difference between success and struggle in school and later in life,” said Maria Whelan, president, Illinois Action for Children.

The report sheds new light on the impact of America’s economic downturn and the role of business leaders in legislative support for preK funding increases. Concerns about workforce development and dismal high school-graduation rates have led business leaders – along with a growing number of parents, educators and school administrators – to join forces with Republicans and Democrats to advance early childhood education as a prudent, evidence-based economic and education reform strategy.

“When achievement gaps are not addressed early, later interventions become much less effective and more costly,” said Harriet Meyer, president, Ounce of Prevention Fund. “By investing in our children early – beginning even at birth – we are investing in the strength and health of our economy and future workforce.”

To view a copy of the report, visit: [www.preknow.org](http://www.preknow.org).

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*Voices for Illinois Children champions the full development of every child in Illinois to assure the future well-being of everyone in the state. We work with families, communities and policymakers on all issues to help children grow up healthy, happy, safe, loved and well educated.*

*Illinois Action for Children is a catalyst for strong families and powerful communities where children matter most.*

*The Ounce of Prevention Fund invests in the healthy development of at-risk infants, toddlers, preschoolers and their families. We use an innovative cycle of family-focused programs, research, training, policy analysis and advocacy to help young children succeed in school and throughout life.*