

Jan. 13, 2022

Honorable J.B. Pritzker, Governor
Honorable Emanuel “Chris” Welch, Speaker, Illinois House of Representatives
Honorable Don Harmon, President, Illinois Senate
Honorable Jim Durkin, Minority Leader, Illinois House of Representatives
Honorable Dan McConchie, Minority Leader, Illinois Senate
Members of the Illinois General Assembly

Dear Illinois Leaders:

As the economic fallout from COVID-19 continues, the need for a robust, high-quality, and accessible system of early care and education has come into even starker relief. It’s clear that early childhood services form a foundation on which all other business sectors rely.

As Illinois business leaders, we have seen what happens when working families lack access to child care and other reliable, affordable services for their children: It prevents parents from returning to work and heightens employers’ hiring challenges. Even before the pandemic, a ReadyNation report showed the infant/toddler child care crisis annually cost our state’s workers and employers nearly \$2.5 billion in lost wages, productivity, and tax revenues — a price tag that has surely grown during the pandemic’s erosion of such services.

An inadequate system of early care and education is also detrimental to our hopes of preparing the workforce of tomorrow. Only three out of 10 children entering kindergarten are fully prepared for school success in early math, language/literacy, and social-emotional development, according to 2019 Illinois data — the very skills on which both academic and professional achievement depend. Furthermore, disparities remain troublingly pronounced among children of color, low-income households, many rural areas, and other communities of need.

To address these challenges, our nonprofit, nonpartisan, ReadyNation network of 3,000+ business leaders throughout the country — over 275 of them in Illinois — supports greater, research-proven investments in the well-being of children and families. Thus, we are encouraged by the recent work of an expert, bipartisan commission on early childhood funding. We support its recommendations for improvement, along with those of the Illinois’ PN3 Coalition (focusing on birth-to-3 needs). We are also encouraged by the important attention these issues are receiving at the federal level, and we urge state policymakers to work together to continue aligning additional, badly needed federal resources with these aims.

The policy priorities below represent significant, further steps toward recalibrating Illinois’ system of early childhood education and services to better meet the needs of children, their families — and, in a very real sense, businesses and our overall state economy.

We urge you to increase state funding for key early childhood programs by at least 10% in the Fiscal Year 2023 (FY23) state budget. Such an increase would help put Illinois on the commission’s

recommended path toward closing the demonstrable gap in early childhood resources. We share these requests with the sobering understanding that state resources are limited, which underscores the need to spend as wisely as possible, in the following programmatic priorities:

- **Preschool and birth-to-3 services:** Echoing the Illinois State Board of Education's recommendation for the coming year, we request an increase of at least \$54.4 million in ISBE's Early Childhood Block Grant to help bolster preschool and critical, birth-to-3 services statewide. It's vital that we boost the chronically low compensation of teachers and other staff, as well as their professional development and support, and extend Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation services to more kids, families, and educators.
- **Child care:** An increase of at least \$41.1 million for the DHS Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP). Workforce stability, productivity and recovery demand that we reverse the erosion of affordable, reliable care for children while their parents are on the job. Federal aid already has helped thousands of providers to weather FY21 and FY22 as best they can, but many programs have closed and others are struggling to avoid following suit. More help is desperately needed.
- **Evidence-based home-visiting services:** A combined increase of \$1.7 million for the DHS-administered Healthy Families Illinois and Parents Too Soon programs to support voluntary "parent-coaching" efforts for the families of at-risk children, from birth to age 3 — services whose state funding has remained stagnant for years. And as plans for anticipated opioid-lawsuit settlement dollars are being made, we encourage policymakers to prioritize the opioid crisis' youngest victims and hardest-hit communities by committing some of those forthcoming resources to these prevention-minded programs that help reduce adverse childhood experiences (often associated with later drug use), as well as connect families with such help as substance-abuse treatment.
- **Early Intervention:** An increase of \$10.9 million for these vital therapies for young children with developmental delays and disabilities, to help meet growing caseloads, bolster low provider compensation, and support data-system improvements.

In addition to these early childhood priorities, we encourage your support of the following elementary-through-postsecondary education requests:

- **After-school programs:** Teen REACH efforts have helped raise participants' grades and graduation rates while providing youth with safe, positive environments during out-of-school hours. An increase of at least \$5.1 million in these DHS services would raise these programs closer to the level of support they enjoyed before years of cuts and neglect. Similarly, our state should continue to maintain the after-school services funded through ISBE.
- **Postsecondary financial aid:** Monetary Award Program (MAP) grants help low-income students to access college. But too few students who qualify for this assistance actually receive funding, and it covers far less ground than it once did. We must stabilize this program's resources to ensure students can rely on the full funding promised to them, and increase assistance to ensure full coverage of tuition and fees at Illinois' public institutions of higher education for all MAP-eligible applicants. A \$50 million increase in MAP support would help progress toward these aims.

Each of these priorities has enjoyed bipartisan support over the years, a testament to their widely acknowledged value. Each remains a vital investment in the well-being of children and families, our

workforce and economy during these trying times. We hope to work with you in these regards, and we thank you for your service and dedication to our state.

Sincerely, the undersigned Illinois business leaders and members of ReadyNation –

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