

January 30, 2018

Honorable Bruce Rauner, Governor
Honorable Michael Madigan, Speaker, Illinois House of Representatives
Honorable John Cullerton, President, Illinois Senate
Honorable Jim Durkin, Minority Leader, Illinois House of Representatives
Honorable Bill Brady, Minority Leader, Illinois Senate
Members of the Illinois General Assembly

Dear Illinois Leaders:

Solid technical skills are essential to a high-quality workforce. Yet non-technical abilities are increasingly important – and increasingly hard to find. Showing-up for the job every day, on time and ready to work. Good communications and teamwork. Perseverance in tasks – all these are among the “social-emotional” or “soft” skills on which the success of individual employees, businesses, and our entire economy depend.

In a nationwide survey of business executives last year, 88 percent noted a growing need for these qualities among employees as our economy changes – but three out of five respondents reported more difficulty finding workers with these skills than those with good technical expertise.

As business leaders from communities throughout Illinois, we urge your support for investments in programs and policies that can help develop important technical and non-technical skills in our future workforce. Many of these priorities are supported through the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and the Illinois Department of Human Services (DHS).

We are members of ReadyNation, a nonprofit, nonpartisan network of more than 2,000 business executives across the country and 200+ here in Illinois. Our goal is a workforce that maintains and sharpens our state’s competitive edge in an increasingly global economy, and our efforts center on support for proven investments in children’s well-being.

Many of our recommendations deal with the well-being of young children, considering the research demonstrating the developmental significance of kids’ earliest years of life. In fact, 90 percent of surveyed business execs believe it’s much tougher to develop the necessary social-emotional skills among adults entering the workforce than among young children.

Thus, in your efforts to shape an Illinois budget for FY2019, we recommend:

- A \$50 million increase in ISBE’s Early Childhood Block Grant to further strengthen voluntary **preschool and birth-to-3 services** that prioritize the needs of at-risk youngsters. This would bring the grant’s total to about \$493.74 million, as requested by ISBE, and reflects the increase envisioned in our

state's multi-year agreement with the federal government to draw-down extra federal funding for early learning. Over the past three years, these combined resources already have opened thousands of preK slots and bolstered program quality. We should build further on these impressive results you have helped achieve.

- Maintaining our state's \$16.9 million investments in DHS' **Healthy Families Illinois** and **Parents Too Soon** initiatives. These home-visiting programs provide voluntary "parent-coaching" help for the new mothers and fathers of at-risk children from birth to age 3. Resource limitations historically prevented these services from reaching even 10 percent of the households that qualified for their assistance – and the state's recent budget impasse only exacerbated those shortfalls. Further underfunding threatens the loss of vital, federal resources for the families of at-risk infants and toddlers.
- Fully supporting the DHS **Child Care Assistance Program**, which is crucial in helping low-income, working parents maintain employment. Studies show the loss of reliable, accessible child care options only fuels workplace absenteeism and undermines business productivity. In addition, high-quality child care is a significant component of our early learning system. We applaud state leaders' work in FY18 to restore eligibility cuts that had affected tens of thousands of children and their families, and encourage your continued efforts to improve child care access and quality.
- Protecting DHS **Early Intervention** services that support various supports for young children – from birth to age 3 – who struggle with developmental delays or disabilities, or associated risks. These therapies and related services help head-off the need for more expensive, remedial assistance later, when young people enter school and eventually the workforce. It's important to maintain their approximately \$96.7 million funding in the coming year.
- Continuing support for ISBE's **Career & Technical Education** efforts, which provide students with experience-based learning opportunities and familiarize them with the skills needed for success promising careers. Illinois should maintain its \$38.1 million in state resources committed to these initiatives, to also ensure their continued federal assistance.

These are chief examples of the steps Illinois can take to build a 21st-century workforce and improve our economy. All of these represent areas of historical, bipartisan agreement and cooperation. It's critical that we keep moving forward, together, and avoid backsliding into the kind of budget impasse our state suffered the past two years – a crisis that undermined many of these aforementioned priorities, as well as the well-being of children, families, communities, and businesses.

We thank you for your service to Illinois, and we look forward to working with you in these regards.

Sincerely, *the undersigned members of the ReadyNation Illinois business-leader network*

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