

**Raising  
Young  
Children  
To the  
Top of the  
Policy  
Agenda:  
Lessons from  
Illinois**

It should not be a banner event when public policy responds to the accumulated findings of countless research studies. But in the early childhood realm, it is.

It should not be extraordinary when public policy catches up with the everyday realities of Americans' lives. But in the early childhood realm, it is.

That is why the Illinois story deserves to be told.

## Preface

Since the 1980s, Illinois has invested significant public funds in efforts to promote optimal early childhood development. In the last four years alone, the state's investment in early education for children from birth to age five through its Early Childhood Block Grant has increased by 73 percent, and now totals \$318 million.

How did Illinois raise young children to the top of the state's policy agenda? Every state is different—structurally, politically, and ideologically—and that affects advocacy efforts and strategies. Yet the Illinois story and its lessons are likely to have some relevance outside our borders. We hope that this account of the Illinois story will offer insight to other states as they continue to push for public policies that respond to accumulated research findings about the importance of the early years. And we hope that over time, making young children a top priority of state policy will become common practice.

The pages that follow tell a story that literally had a cast of thousands. Countless individuals and organizations from every part of the state played a role in raising young children to the top of Illinois' policy agenda. They researched, explained, cajoled, visited, corresponded, funded, lobbied, convened, rallied, discussed, and voted.

## **Bold Initiatives Need Bold Leadership**

*Preschool for All* put Illinois at the forefront of early childhood policy and practice. How did it happen? Different people stress different factors, but all agree that leadership was key. *Preschool for All* would not have happened without bold leadership in many arenas, including the governor's office, legislative chambers, community groups, providers, philanthropy, and advocacy organizations.

Governor Rod Blagojevich was a driving force behind *Preschool for All*. The Governor was inspired by a convergence of research from several fields—including neuroscience, cognitive science, and developmental psychology—showing that high-quality child development and early learning programs build a solid foundation for later achievement and citizenship. He acted on his conviction that all children in the state deserve the excellent early learning settings that he and his wife have been able to provide for their daughters.

But the Governor didn't act alone, or start from scratch. Members of the Illinois General Assembly on both sides of the aisle pressed, over many years, for public investment in early childhood development and learning, from birth to age five. They shaped the *Preschool for All* bill that will, over time, reach all children whose parents want to enroll them in a preschool setting.

The *Preschool for All* plan was developed by the Illinois Early Learning Council's more than 200 members who all brought their diverse experience and knowledge to the table. The Council and its committees included representatives from the General Assembly; advocacy organizations; schools; child care centers and licensed child care homes; Head Start; higher education; state, local, and federal government agencies; business; law enforcement; foundations; and parents.

Community and provider groups provided leadership and input from the ground level as well. Says Ric Estrada, Executive Director of Chicago's Erie Neighborhood House, "We worked on committees, gathered the troops for trips to Springfield, and made our case to elected officials."

Helping to inform and support leaders in all of these arenas were many statewide advocacy organizations, and they in turn were supported with strategic funding from local and national foundations.

As *Preschool for All* moves from the floor of the legislature to the floors, sandboxes, and story corners of early childhood programs, some of the most difficult challenges lie ahead. Nurturing the next generation of leaders often seems to be a luxury that struggling organizations can ill afford. But the Illinois story shows that leadership matters—in every sector, at every level. And since the work is far from done, those who contributed to progress in Illinois stress that leadership development remains a high priority.

They wrote letters, or articles, or legislation, or checks. Some offered expertise in the realm of policy; others brought to bear first-hand knowledge of how early childhood settings shape young children's day-to-day experiences and development. Each contributed in a different way, but all were committed to improving prospects for children. We were not able to name all of the people or groups who contributed to progress for Illinois' young children, but we hope that everyone who played a role will find his or her experiences or vantage point reflected somewhere in this story.

### Key Lessons from Illinois

What can advocates and funders learn from the Illinois story? Here is a preview:

**1. Build from core beliefs, not blueprints:**

Articulate your core beliefs. As you build your organization and work with others toward shared goals, be ready to shift gears and seize opportunities—but hold your ground when core beliefs are at stake.

**2. Build leadership:** Cultivate leaders at the community and state levels who can communicate their passion and their goals to everyone they meet—across political and organizational boundaries.

**3. Focus on relationships:** Make ongoing efforts to build relationships. An inclusive approach is crucial. Embracing diversity is crucial. Build relationships with communities of all ethnic, racial and socioeconomic description; with lawmakers across the political spectrum; with administrators in state agencies; with the media.

**4. Take a marathon approach:** Recognize the incremental nature of progress and the sustained resources required to achieve it.

# What Did Illinois Do?

In 2006, when the Illinois state legislature resoundingly approved *Preschool for All*, Illinois became the first state in the nation to make voluntary high-quality preschool for all three- and four-year-olds a reality. The plan went well beyond preschool, funding in addition a wide range of child development services for infants and toddlers at risk of later school failure. Early childhood advocates had worked diligently for years to keep the focus on children from birth to five.

The *Preschool for All* bill was one of the final pieces of business that the Illinois General Assembly conducted as the spring legislative session drew to a close. Advocates and the Governor's staff were in constant contact with Early Learning Council leaders, key constituencies and legislators. Each time they ironed out a wrinkle, another appeared, but they remained focused on the goal. In the end, the plan passed unanimously in one chamber of the legislature and with substantial bipartisan support in the other.

"Passage of *Preschool for All* was a wonderful victory for children," says Judith Walker-Kendrick, who chairs Illinois' Child Care Advisory Council and also heads the Chicago Coalition of Site-Administered Child Care Programs. "The program is supposed to function wherever the kids are—in all settings and all communities. We have to work very hard to make sure that happens now."

*Preschool for All* was not the only victory for young children and their families in 2006. The Illinois legislature also increased funding for children's mental health and early intervention, increased reimbursement rates for child care providers across the state, and made a much needed cost-of-living adjustment for voluntary home visiting programs for at-risk families. By lowering barriers to student teaching, the legislature also made it easier for teacher aides and other early childhood practitioners to pursue teacher certification while juggling job and family responsibilities.

Today, many other states are recognizing the importance of the early years and are grappling with the complexities of early childhood policy. Some are focusing primarily on four-year-olds; others are addressing the needs of younger children as well. Some are aiming to include all children; others are planning more targeted programs. Some are intent on putting programs in place; others, like Illinois, are intent on building an early childhood system by focusing on professional development and supports for providers and programs as well as strong quality assurance mechanisms.

What accounts for Illinois' progress? What might policymakers, advocates, and funders in other states learn from Illinois' approach? Which strategies hinged on conditions unique to the state, and which hold promise for success elsewhere? The pages that follow recount Illinois' journey, providing answers to these questions along the way.

## **A History of Bipartisan Action**

Governor Rod Blagojevich, a Democrat, has been responsible for an historic expansion in early childhood services for children from birth to five. But these strides were possible because his Republican predecessors in the governor's office, along with legislators, had put into place essential elements of an early childhood system.

The legislators who passed *Preschool for All* into law came from all parts of the state and represented diverse ethnic and racial groups; and they came from both sides of the aisle.

"Illinois has a long tradition of fierce pragmatism," comments Mike Lawrence, who served in the administration of Republican Governor Jim Edgar. "Illinois politicians—both Republicans and Democrats—tend to look at problems and figure out how they can be solved without becoming caught up in ideology."

Elliot Regenstein served as Director of Education Reform for Governor Blagojevich during the two and a half years that *Preschool for All* was designed and passed into law, and co-chairs the Illinois Early Learning Council that helped to develop the initiative. According to Regenstein, "There was a good undersized program when Governor Blagojevich came into office, and now there is a better, rapidly expanding program. There was an existing canvas on which the Governor could come in and paint these bold strokes."

*Children often appear to grow by leaps and bounds overnight, but parents know that their sudden "sprouting" has in fact resulted from months and years of nurture and care. So it is with policy.*

# What Sets Illinois Apart?

Many states have introduced preschool programs, but Illinois stands apart in several ways.

**Its Scope:** When *Preschool for All* was passed, Illinois was already helping to finance early education and child care arrangements for a large number of young children. In fiscal year 2005, 45 percent of three- and four-year-olds were enrolled in government-supported programs. The state could have rested on its laurels. Instead, Illinois passed a \$45 million expansion of the Early Childhood Block Grant to launch *Preschool for All* and build up, over time, voluntary preschool for all three- and four-year-olds.

**Its Focus on Quality:** The Illinois plan expands an existing program that has high quality standards. It offers supports to providers to help them meet those standards and it focuses birth-to-three funding on research-based programs.

**Its Attention to All Children from Birth to Age Five:** *Preschool for All* sets aside 11 cents of every preschool dollar to fund preventive, developmental, and family support services for those infants and toddlers who face the greatest challenges. In this way, it continues Illinois' birth-to-five tradition and sets a precedent—showing that states can dramatically expand preschoolers' access to high-quality early education while addressing the most pressing needs of children from birth to age five. It is faithful to the research that demonstrates children are born learning and it affirms the notion that all children deserve a high-quality early learning experience.

**Its Inclusive Planning Process:** In the realm of early learning, the best laid plans of lawmakers, administrators, advocates, and funders make little difference if providers and parents are not engaged from the start. In Illinois, people who staff early childhood programs (including preschools, child care centers, and licensed child care homes) were at the table from the outset. Community members took on many leadership roles and made their voices heard, helping to ensure that *Preschool for All* would serve children in diverse settings and communities. The Illinois Early Learning Council, the body that worked out details of the plan, had some two hundred participants, representing virtually all stakeholders in early childhood.

**Its Realism About Families' Needs:** *Preschool for All* empowers parents with a range of program options and settings, from public and private schools to child care centers and other community-based agencies. It respects parents as children's first teachers, letting them make decisions, based on the needs of their children, about who will provide care and education for them, where, and for how long. A voluntary program offering parental choice, *Preschool for All* enjoyed strong bipartisan support.

**Its Commitment to Building an Early Childhood System:** Many states have funded early childhood programs without making allowances for the infrastructure needed to support quality—such as professional development, assessment and evaluation, and supports to promote healthy social and emotional development for all children. In contrast, *Preschool for All* made provisions for all of the components needed to build and sustain a vital early childhood system.



## **Spearheading Advocacy Efforts: Organizational Breadth and Depth**

Many organizations have advocated for quality and equity for Illinois' young children. Three organizations deeply knowledgeable about early childhood policy have led the way:

### **Illinois Action for Children:**

Founded in 1969, Illinois Action for Children has long been dedicated to the promotion and expansion of quality early care and education in Illinois. Over the years, Action for Children has expanded its work to meet the burgeoning needs of working families and their children and to make the most of advances made in the policy arena. Starting as a small, volunteer advocacy agency, the organization is now multifaceted, employing a staff of nearly 400. Core activities include program services for families and providers, program development, and public policy and advocacy.

### **Ounce of Prevention Fund:**

Founded in 1982, the Ounce of Prevention Fund is a public-private partnership that invests in the healthy development of at-risk infants, toddlers, and preschool children. The Ounce advocates for public policy changes that better serve all children and families, develops and operates innovative early childhood programs in some of Illinois' most challenging communities, uses research to better understand what works in helping families, provides extensive training to early childhood professionals throughout the state, and shares its successful models across the country.

### **Voices for Illinois Children:**

Voices for Illinois Children is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, statewide group of child advocates. Since 1987, Voices has worked with families, communities, and policymakers to implement policies and programs that benefit children of all ages and their families. Through policy analysis, public education and outreach, Voices generates support from civic, business and community leaders for cost-effective and practical proposals that ensure all children grow up healthy, nurtured, safe, and well-educated.

# How Did They Do That?

The Illinois story is about bipartisan legislative leadership. It is about community engagement and broad constituency building. It is about steadfast gubernatorial leadership. And it is about strategic funding for policy development and advocacy work.

Early childhood leaders say that there was only one way to achieve such dramatic progress: persuade citizens from across the state of Illinois to share accountability for the well-being of young children. Parents, legislators, child care providers, teachers, business leaders, philanthropists, law enforcement officials—people from many walks of life had to become informed, convinced, and committed to change and to long-term investment. Individuals in positions of influence had to take on the issue as their own.

The advocacy work needed to bring this about was intense and difficult. Many individuals and organizations have contributed to progress for children in Illinois, but over many years three

advocacy organizations emerged as leaders in the field: Illinois Action for Children, the Ounce of Prevention Fund, and Voices for Illinois Children.

Over time, Illinois moved beyond the “wonder” years: Parents and providers didn’t just wonder where the dollars needed to pay for quality would come from; they rode buses to Springfield to demand realistic, fair reimbursement rates and eligibility rules for child care and increases in funding for early education. Business leaders didn’t just wonder where tomorrow’s skilled workers would come from; they started talking to lawmakers about the right start in life for babies and toddlers. School officials didn’t just wonder how they would meet high standards when children were arriving in kindergarten without the good developmental foundation needed to succeed; they joined the call for investment in high-quality early learning programs.

How did this happen? The story begins decades ago.

## **A Story of Strong Advocacy**

Now that *Preschool for All* has passed, Illinois’ story may not seem like a cliffhanger. But success was not inevitable. For over a decade, advocates led a sustained and coordinated effort to keep the focus on research showing that support for early childhood development protects the state’s huge investment in K-12 schooling and keeps making a difference into adulthood. Sara Slaughter, Education Program Director at the McCormick Tribune Foundation, stresses the breadth and depth of the state’s early childhood advocacy and provider organizations. “They are unparalleled in their sophistication and effectiveness and have worked diligently and relentlessly to make early education a priority over the long haul. I am convinced that they have played a critical role in the enormous gains we’ve seen in Illinois.”

## **Nonprofit organizations recognized the importance of advocacy**

In the 1980s, professionals who staffed nonprofit organizations in Illinois found themselves commiserating, and then collaborating, when administrative obstacles or political wrangling got in the way of high-quality, affordable services for young children. Their collaboration has persisted over decades.

Jerry Stermer, President of Voices for Illinois Children, recalls coming together with like-minded colleagues during the 1980s, when deep cuts at the federal level jolted all nonprofits—including those meeting the needs of children. “Faced with slashed budgets,” Stermer says, “we understood that we were all in this together.”

“*In this together*” meant sharing knowledge—about policies and people and when to push where. It meant working together to identify legislators willing to take on the issue and to garner their support. That was not always easy. Over the years, advocates have continued working together to gather bipartisan support for investments in the early years.

“*In this together*” also meant working together to rally support among the families who rely on early childhood services. Says Maria Whelan, President of Illinois Action for Children, “All parents have dreams for their kids. When the state budget was terrible for young children, we brought thousands of parents to the state capitol. You’d better believe they made themselves heard! Parents get very vocal when their children are in jeopardy. We said to the politicians: listen up, this is called democracy.”

“*In this together*” meant committing to not saying: you can take money from this agency or that budget to increase support for young children. Says Maria Whelan, “When politicians asked where the money should come from, our reply was: ‘We elected you to be leaders—it’s your job to find the money for what citizens in our state need from their government.’”

Harriet Meyer, President of the Ounce of Prevention Fund, says: “We have always been serious about building the big early childhood tent.” Advocates worked to gather under that tent constituencies whose interests are not always aligned with each other, such as K-12 educators and child care providers. And they have strived to bring systems as varied as health, education, family support and child care closer together so they could better serve young children and their families.

Finally, “*in this together*” meant being unified in their commitment to the three principles that mattered most to them: high-quality services for young children and their families; equitable access to those services; and a focus on the entire birth-to-five span of early childhood, not just the year leading up to kindergarten.

Early childhood advocates realized that private contributions were essential to the organizing and political work they considered crucial. They turned to individuals and to Illinois’ philanthropies for funding. And a key to Illinois’ success has been strategic, sustained support from Illinois funders to build the advocacy capacity of the early childhood field over time.

## **Foundations made strategic, sustained investments in advocacy and public policy work**

Every state has champions—or potential champions—who can make a powerful case for public investment in early childhood development and learning. These individuals may have become passionate, as parents or grandparents, about the opportunities of the early years. They may have gained intimate knowledge, as providers or community activists, of children’s promise and parents’ dreams. As public school officials, business leaders or law enforcement officers, they may know firsthand the risks associated with a shaky start in life.

In Illinois, young children had an especially eloquent advocate and strategic philanthropist in Irving Harris. To be sure, many individuals and organizations have contributed to progress for children in Illinois. Funding has come from many sources, reflecting many hopes. But Harris was an early catalyst.

A business entrepreneur who called Illinois home, Harris was passionate about closing the wide gap he saw between the revelations of science and the realities of young children’s lives. He used the resources he amassed in business to establish a variety of institutions dedicated to the well-being of young children, including the Erikson Institute, the Ounce of Prevention Fund, ZERO TO THREE, and the Yale Child Study Center. Just as important as his financial contributions was his ability to inspire others. “Irving had a vast circle of business associates, policymakers, practitioners, academics, friends, and family, and he would talk to anyone and everyone about the findings of child development

### **A Story of Good Philanthropy**

“The Illinois story is about strong advocacy, but it is also about good philanthropy,” says Harriet Meyer, President of the Chicago-based Ounce of Prevention Fund. “It’s not just about dollars,” she says. “The field has benefited enormously from investments that are long-term, strategic, and grounded in research. Illinois grantmakers who support early childhood initiatives are unusually well-informed about the issues and have allowed us to make our organizations strong.”

Grantmakers recognized the complexity of the system-building process, and different foundations focused on different parts of the challenge, such as research, advocacy and policy development, and professional development.

They have also have been realistic about the teamwork needed to build an early childhood system. According to Jerry Stermer, President of Voices for Illinois Children, “Grantmakers wisely resisted the impulse to formalize or institutionalize collaboration,” he says. “The operating funds they provided allowed us to sit down together at the same table. But they didn’t house that table or staff it or set benchmarks for it. They got out of the way—and let it thrive.”

research and the opportunities of the early years,” says Phyllis Glink, Executive Director of the Irving Harris Foundation.

Harris was convinced that dramatic change would hinge, ultimately, on public investment in the early years, but that the private sector had a crucial role to play. In the early 1990s, armed with solid research and data on the impact of investing in early childhood, Harris spoke to the Board of Directors of the McCormick Tribune Foundation businessman to businessman. He helped convince them to shift their education-related investments to focus on the well-being of infants.

In 1993, the McCormick Tribune Foundation launched a ten-year grant making program originally called Focus on Quality, committing to improving prospects for children under the age of five. Understanding that good policies are as important as good programs, the Foundation raised early development and learning high on its agenda, and placed a greater emphasis on funding advocacy and public policy work. In the thirteen years that have followed, the McCormick Tribune Foundation has been a leader – both sustaining and expanding its original commitment – having invested \$75.8 million in early education to date.

Giving capacity-building grants to a broad range of advocacy organizations allowed the McCormick Tribune Foundation to respond to emerging opportunities and changing political realities and to reach out to diverse constituencies who all have a stake in early childhood. The Foundation has been broad and strategic and brought new voices to the table, among others, El Valor to strengthen early childhood advocacy efforts in the Latino community,

Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Illinois to bring the law enforcement voice to the table, and the Chicago Metro Association for the Education of Young Children and the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies to improve professional development opportunities in early childhood. The Foundation has always encouraged its education grantees to work together, keeping the focus on the big picture and how the field as a whole is evolving.

Sara Slaughter, who currently oversees the Foundation’s Education Program, underscores the importance of building broad capacity over time. Like her predecessors on the McCormick Tribune staff, Nick Goodban, Denise Carter Blank and Wanda Newell, Slaughter believes that supporting policy analysis, advocacy and systems development can have a big payoff. Says Slaughter, “Based on our experience, I would say to my colleagues in the foundation world: Don’t be afraid of funding advocacy and systems-building work. The greatest leverage in terms of public investment in young children comes from that.”

In short, the McCormick Tribune Foundation not only supported but also modeled the long-term commitment needed to advance an agenda as far-reaching as early childhood learning and development, recognizing that even victories that are years in the making, such as *Preschool for All*, are milestones, not destinations.

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*Legislators need to know that key constituencies in their district will understand and approve their positions.*

But the McCormick Tribune Foundation has not been alone. The growing body of research on the importance of the early years struck a chord with other major philanthropies that have invested in early childhood and understand the critical importance of funding policy and advocacy work. Locally, a number of foundations have invested in building the capacity of the early childhood field in Illinois over time, including The Joyce Foundation, the W. Clement & Jessie V. Stone Foundation, the Woods Fund of Chicago, the Chicago Community Trust, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Michael Reese Health Trust, the Illinois Children's Healthcare Foundation, Northern Trust, Prince Charitable Trusts, the Pritzker Cousins Foundation, Chase, and a number of dedicated family foundations.

The momentum generated by local funding support, the strength of Illinois' advocates and the progress made leveraged additional foundation support from outside the state. As part of its national campaign for universal preschool, the Pew Charitable Trusts/Pre-K Now has provided strong support for Illinois' most recent public awareness and policy efforts around expanding preschool. Multi-year funding from Build, an initiative of the national Early Childhood Funders Collaborative – which counts among its members the Irving Harris Foundation, The Joyce Foundation, the McCormick Tribune Foundation, and the Pritzker Cousins Foundation in Illinois – has supported broad reform across the many systems that reach young children and their families in addition to preschool.

Two decades ago, the state had a fraction of the people working on advocacy and policy reform that it does now. The investments in capacity have translated into multiple staff who advocate in Springfield, support

### Early Childhood in Prime Time

Faced with setbacks in the mid-to-late 1990s, advocates focused on new strategies and tailored strategies to specific groups, such as providers, lawmakers, and administrators of state agencies. Some believed that consciousness-raising efforts had to be even broader.

Jerry Stermer recalls sitting down with the McCormick Tribune Foundation soon after the Ready to Learn legislation was blocked in Springfield. Stermer recalls, "They said, 'we've always thought this will only go really big if there is more public appreciation of the issue.' They gave us a grant large enough to purchase serious airtime—not the 3 a.m. public service slots, but the kind of airtime political campaigns buy, around newscasts when policy-attentive viewers and voters tune in."

The first ads ran in 2000, stressing that the years before kindergarten are a prime time for learning. Another round of TV and radio ads ran early in 2001. Stermer says that they succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. "We thought if we were lucky, before-and-after polls would show a 5% increase in the number of people embracing the idea of investing in the early years. Instead, the increase was 12%." According to Stermer, legislators reported being influenced by the ads as well. "These messages helped make the public more receptive to *Preschool for All*."

statewide planning processes, conduct policy research and analysis, write policy papers, form relationships with the media, organize parents and providers, educate legislators, and reach out to opinion leaders. This dedicated philanthropic support over the years from a variety of sources has built depth and expertise and made possible the dramatic policy changes that Illinois has seen for young children.

### **Leading advocacy organizations joined forces**

Over a quarter century, many groups joined the struggle for quality and equity for young children, but Action for Children, the Ounce of Prevention Fund, and Voices for Illinois Children brought people together to move forward an ambitious policy agenda. Each organization has a unique mission, and each takes a different approach to advancing the quality agenda, but they agreed to settle any and all differences behind closed doors and work together for change. In 1992, along with Chicago Metro Association for the Education of Young Children, they created an informal network called the Quality Alliance for Early Childhood Settings, which has grown and continues to this day as a table for strategy discussions.

All three organizations are deeply knowledgeable about policy, advocacy and politics; all have accumulated substantial experience on a wide range of issues. Their leaders and staff are in frequent touch. When there is news in the field, someone will know the back story. When a new regulation has been put on the books, someone will know how it is playing out in a particular part of the state. When an influential voice is needed to reassure a skittish lawmaker before a crucial vote, someone will have the right contact.

*There was only one way to achieve such dramatic progress: persuade citizens from across the state of Illinois to share accountability for the well-being of young children.*

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Many organizations and advocacy groups have worked in collaboration to exert influence all over the state. They have gained reputations as the go-to people on a wide variety of questions that concern young children and their families. They have spent years educating candidates and elected officials from both parties, as well as the state agency administrators who stay in place as governors and their aides come and go. They have gotten to know the reporters who cover politics and education for a host of media outlets. They have translated research into accessible materials and disseminated them widely. When they have disagreed with policies and regulations, they pushed back at every level—engaging families and communities (“grassroots”) and individuals in positions of influence (“grasstops”). In short, the activists who agreed to work together in decades past turned out to be “lifers” and now play key roles in early childhood organizations.

The degree of coordination and collaboration among early childhood advocates in Illinois is remarkable according to Sara Slaughter. When opportunities arose, they were ready and able to seize them—separately and together. And as new organizations entered the early childhood advocacy scene, they made room at the table. Separately, these organizations have been effective practitioners and advocates. Together, they have proven to be immovable on matters of principle; nimble and agile in the realm of politics.

## Illinois advocates connected the dots between early childhood and emerging policy challenges

Issues like early childhood development do not emerge in isolation, nor do they maintain the same sense of urgency all the time. Over many years and many administrations, even an issue of great significance will have to share the spotlight with other priorities. For stretches of time, a policy will be eclipsed by higher-profile issues. Strategic advocates and funders look for ways to connect the dots between their issue and other priorities.

In the 1980s, policymakers focused heavily on school reform; in the 1990s, attention turned to welfare reform. Both movements presented opportunities to advance the early childhood agenda, and Illinois advocates were quick to seize them. Programs for young children were valued to the extent that they furthered these agendas.

In 1985, after a report entitled *A Nation at Risk* sounded an alarm about mediocre educational achievement in the United States, the Illinois legislature passed a school reform package. Thanks to the teamwork of early childhood scholars and staff at the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), advocates and legislators, the package included the Illinois Prekindergarten Program for Children At Risk of Academic Failure.

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*Don't be afraid of funding advocacy and systems building work. The greatest leverage in terms of public investment in young children comes from that.*

Advocates kept a focus on children from birth to three as well. In 1989, through the work of the Ounce of Prevention Fund and a number of legislators, two important prevention programs were funded through the ISBE to expand access to early childhood development services for infants and toddlers and provide parent education for their families. Annual appropriations for these programs crept up slowly over the next decade.

There were also disappointments. In the early 1990s, advocacy organizations called upon Illinois legislators to create a state Ready to Learn Council, charged with developing an early learning plan for the state. A Ready to Learn plan was developed and won significant support in the legislature. Then a minor disagreement led the governor at the time, Jim Edgar, to issue an amendatory veto of the bill. Opposition from the far right and behind-the-scenes maneuvering reversed momentum. The bill's opponents were too few in number to defeat it, but they created procedural roadblocks and prevented the bill from coming to a vote. This was a setback—but one that energized advocates and underscored the need to work together.

And there were changes in the policy context. In the mid-to-late 1990s, welfare reform dominated the policy arena. New welfare legislation sought to move families from welfare to work, and this could not be accomplished without scaling up child care services. Parents who managed to leave the welfare rolls by finding low-wage jobs would be hard pressed to keep those jobs without affordable care for their young children. Illinois lawmakers responded with a broader approach, expanding access to subsidized child care.



The 1990s brought not only new pressures, but also new policy tools. During this period, block granting also became a major funding tool: the federal government gave states welfare dollars in lump sums, and states were charged with using the monies to meet legislative mandates. The Illinois legislature applied this model to K-12 education funding by giving a block grant to the Chicago Public Schools.

Yet early childhood advocates were concerned that state block granting would actually shrink the number of dollars available to school districts for preschool programs. Advocates highlighted the problem and proposed a solution: lumping together funding for prevention and parenting initiatives for infants and toddlers with preschool monies.

It didn't just happen. "We were proactive," says Nancy Shier, Policy Director at the Ounce. "We were committed to growing a system that included infants and toddlers as well as preschoolers, and we were looking for a way to do it." Advocates put that together with the idea of a set-aside—earmarking a percentage of preschool funds to serve infants and toddlers at risk of poor outcomes. The federal government had used a birth-to-three set-aside when it created Early Head Start from the original Head Start preschool program. "So we modeled our approach on that. And we met very little resistance," says Shier. In 1997, Illinois established the Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) and a birth-to-five funding stream of \$154 million was born.

Advocates recognized that Illinois had made long strides, but looked ahead to milestones yet to be achieved. The state had not yet expanded access to early childhood development and learning programs for all children whose families wanted to enroll them. It had not committed the additional investments needed to ensure quality as well as access. Child care providers received subsidies for more children, but the dollars available for each child often did not allow caregivers to seek training or give individual children more attention or make the many changes needed to offer the kinds of experiences that have been shown to benefit children and brighten their futures. Advocates responded by rethinking their goals and strategies.

### **Scientists' findings helped shift the focus to quality**

Until the mid 1990s, optimal development for Illinois' young children was not viewed as a worthy public policy goal in and of itself. Quality took a back seat to access. This began to change as scientific research brought home the lasting impact of early experiences.

The invention of computerized brain scans in the 1970s allowed scientists to see the workings of the living brain and to learn more about how experiences affect the way the brain develops and functions. Gradually this research became known to a wider public, including early educators and early childhood advocates.

In the decade that followed, research on early brain development was more systematically reviewed and synthesized by a variety of organizations, with attention to implications for policymakers. At the

same time, journalists became better informed about that research and passed it on to a wider public. Beginning in the late 1990s, virtually every major news magazine produced at least one cover story—and often several—on the remarkable capacities of the young brain.

Among those captivated by the new insights from brain science was Republican Governor Jim Edgar and his wife, Brenda, who valued the findings both as public figures and grandparents. Mike Lawrence, Director of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, was press secretary and senior advisor to Governor Edgar. He recalls that the Governor and First Lady were struck by the 1997 *Newsweek* cover story on brain development and made it required reading for top staffers. In the budget address he delivered that year, Governor Edgar told Illinoisans: “We know much more now about the brain development of our grandchildren than we did about the development of our children. But knowing is not enough. We need to respond, particularly when there are indications that children are at risk of not realizing their potential.” New insights into early development kept a spotlight on early childhood after the Edgar administration. The next First Lady, Lura Lynn Ryan, chaired a “Futures for Kids” initiative, and in the fall of 2000 convened an assembly on early care and education.

While brain scientists showed that children’s early experiences make a lasting difference, other researchers proved that high-quality programs do actually brighten their futures. A number of landmark longitudinal studies that follow young children enrolled in high-quality programs and compare them with similar children who did not

### **Media: Dateline—Chicago**

In the early 1990s, two in-depth series of articles appeared in the influential *Chicago Tribune* giving the public a glimpse of dramatic advances in scientists’ ability to study the human brain, thanks to computerized brain scans. The articles explained how nature builds the brain before birth and develops it during the early months and years of life. It confirmed that both nature and nurture matter, and showed how early experiences help to determine the brain’s architecture and build a foundation for later learning. For his work, reporter Ron Kotulak was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Journalism in 1994.

participate report better outcomes for program participants, both in later schooling and in life. Compared with non-participants, participants were more likely to succeed in school without special education, graduate, hold down jobs, stay off public assistance, and avoid skirmishes with the law. In these ways, high-quality programs were shown to provide a significant return on taxpayers’ investments.

### **Advocates stayed on top of legislative processes**

Researchers provided a powerful rationale for public investments in early childhood development and learning, but studies do not always translate into votes. Legislators need to know that key constituencies in their district will understand and approve their

positions. Advocacy organizations can often provide reassurance based on polling or direct contact with individuals and groups in legislators' districts.

Illinois organizations have placed scores of boots on the ground in Springfield to lobby for public investment in the early years. They organized group lunches with legislators. With their board members, they hosted dinners and house parties. "Advocates did a wonderful job, nagging me every step of the way," says Representative Barbara Flynn Currie, a sponsor of the original state prekindergarten bill in 1985 and the *Preschool for All* bill in 2006.

"They were everywhere," says former Blagojevich aide Elliot Regenstein. "You couldn't turn around in Springfield without having someone talk to you about early brain development."

The emphasis on advocacy was unusual for this kind of issue. Says Leo Smith, an early childhood advocate who formerly ran the Illinois Birth to Five Political Action Committee, "What group do you know of that is shopping a relatively non-ideological issue like better care for children and has six full-time lobbyists representing six different groups in Springfield and gives six figures annually to politics?" Numbers matter, he adds, because the political process does not respond to a one-person effort. "There are plenty of legislative offices I can't walk into because the person doesn't know me—or knows me too well. With five or six people working on early childhood from different organizations, someone else can knock on the door and make a difference. The impact of having a team of consistent lobbyists is magnified 25 or 30 times over."

### **Legislative Groups Press for Quality Preschool Services**

Among supporters of *Preschool for All* were legislative groups that spent years advocating for high-quality early childhood services.

In the 1990s, a bipartisan group of women state legislators formed COWL—the Conference of Women Legislators. COWL included legislators from both sides of the aisle, but from the start, the expansion and improvement of early childhood programs proved to be common ground.

COWL continues to build support for early childhood initiatives. Its members are joined in championing early childhood by a significant number of male legislators.

The Illinois Legislative Black Caucus, led in the House by Rep. Marlowe Colvin and in the Senate by Sen. Kimberly Lightford, and the Illinois Legislative Latino Caucus, co-chaired by Sen. Miguel del Valle and Rep. Edward Acevedo, have also worked to expand access to high quality early childhood programs. Members of these caucuses are either members of the Latino or African American communities, or represent largely Latino or African American constituencies. Sen. del Valle, who chairs the Senate's Education Committee, has focused especially on the need to recruit and retain excellent teachers for early childhood classrooms.

Maria Whelan adds, “It’s not just boots on the ground in Springfield. It’s boots on the ground around the state.” Advocacy organizations are able to talk to legislators about the needs of families with young children in their districts, showing them how deeply their constituencies care about these issues. Sometimes, they bring legislators’ own constituents, often teachers, business leaders and pediatricians, to their district offices to talk convincingly about the needs back home.

Other times, they give public officials a first-hand look at early childhood up close. State Senator Carol Ronen took Rod Blagojevich on a tour of a high-quality birth-to-five center in Chicago when he was still a Congressman and advocates spent time with him laying out the case for investments in the early years. This was not serendipity, but part of a long-term, bipartisan strategy to build political support for the issue at all levels.

### **Other influential Illinoisans helped build momentum**

In a democracy, sound public policy requires more than a Governor, legislators and advocates. Without input and support from key constituencies, even the most sensible policies will not take hold. Progress in Illinois hinged on support from parents, business leaders, law enforcement officials, educators, early childhood providers, health care providers, and other influential groups of citizens.

Support for *Preschool for All* came from many communities. Case in point: Leaders of the state’s Latino community, which had tended to be under-represented in the state prekindergarten program, took up this issue. Illinois State Board of Education

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*Faced with slashed budgets, we understood that we were all in this together.*

#### **Building a Big Tent**

A broad range of groups have advocated for initiatives to ensure that young children are supported in their learning and development from birth.

In 1992, four organizations came together as the Quality Alliance for Early Childhood Settings: Day Care Action Council (now Illinois Action for Children), Ounce of Prevention Fund, Voices for Illinois Children and the Chicago Metropolitan Association for the Education of Young Children.

Over the years, many organizations have joined them in calling for high-quality early childhood programs. Together, they have developed and supported a shared legislative agenda for young children under the banner of Early Learning Illinois. Among the numerous groups under the tent are: Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Illinois, Chicago Metropolis 2020, Illinois Association for the Education of Young Children and its local affiliates, El Valor, Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law, Illinois Head Start Association, Illinois Federation of Teachers, Family Focus, Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, Erikson Institute, National-Louis University, and numerous early childhood professional and provider organizations and state and local civic groups.

Chairman Jesse Ruiz and State Representative Cynthia Soto met with Latino parents to discuss the legislation's benefits for young children. Ric Estrada, Executive Director of Chicago's Erie Neighborhood House, has been a strong supporter, and often talks about his daughter's experience in Erie's preschool program. "Preschool is more than shapes and numbers," he says. "Together with parents we are beginning to strengthen our greatest assets—our children—by building social, emotional and critical thinking skills and abilities."

Building relationships with business leaders was another part of the advocacy work. The business case was bolstered by the findings of leading economists, such as two of Illinois' Nobel Laureates in Economics, Dr. James Heckman and Dr. Gary Becker of the University of Chicago, whose research has added substantial weight to the rationale for public investment in the early years. Decades ago, Irving Harris' was a lone voice making this case; now, local and national business organizations such as Chicago Metropolis 2020 and the Committee for Economic Development are convinced that improving achievement in our nation's schools is vital to keeping our enterprises competitive, and investing in the early years is the key to strengthening education.

Law enforcement officials also know first-hand the benefits that accrue and the problems that can be averted when children have a good start in life. Increasingly, they have added their voices to the chorus calling for investments in the early years, citing strong evidence from longitudinal research studies that children who receive high-quality developmental services in the early years are less likely to be involved in crime. Illinois has a strong chapter of a national organization that has made this

case powerfully, Fight Crime: Invest in Kids. A group that also deserves special mention is Illinois' K-12 educators, because on the face of it, they have the most to gain, and perhaps the most to lose, from large infusions of taxpayer dollars into early childhood programs. And indeed, Governor Blagojevich fielded challenges on this score. Shouldn't elementary and secondary schools top his agenda, given the great need to improve achievement? On this point, the Governor was candid and consistent: Governing is about setting priorities, he responded. And in the long term, investments in the early years hold the greatest promise for improving results for children—in school and in later life. Over the last four years, the Governor has also significantly increased funding for K-12, showing the interdependence of improvement efforts in early childhood and later schooling.

Increasingly, K-12 educators are appreciating this logic. National leaders in K-12 education, including the states' chief school officers and teachers unions, have long supported a preschool-for-all approach, recognizing that principals and teachers are now held accountable for the achievement of children who enter their schools unprepared to benefit fully from the instruction that awaits them in kindergarten and beyond.

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*"They were everywhere," says former Blagojevich aide Elliot Regenstein. "You couldn't turn around in Springfield without having someone talk to you about early brain development."*

## Advocates kept up the pressure during lean years

While keeping on top of legislative affairs, advocates in Illinois also stayed in contact with the administrators in state agencies who have considerable influence on policy implementation and regulation, and typically stay in place when governors are replaced. During periods when advocates could reasonably expect to have a more modest impact on legislation, they continued to monitor closely administrative processes and work closely with agency decision-makers. That allowed knowledge and trust to build over time. They created working groups that made progress on crucial building blocks of quality and access, such as professional development, bilingual issues and children's social-emotional health.

Administrative lobbying is an effective strategy in states like Illinois where decision-making in the early childhood realm is concentrated at the state level and the same set of rules applies in Peoria as in DuPage County. In states where early childhood and other human services are more decentralized—managed by counties or localities—decisions are made by a much larger number of agencies and administrators and are harder to influence.

Moreover, during lean years, when progress was unlikely on major initiatives, advocates chipped away at other important goals, helping to expand access to and improve the quality of prenatal care, pediatric well-child care, home visiting programs, early intervention services, and quality child care. In the late 1990s, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation provided critical support—continued since by the Early Childhood Funders Collaborative

### Beyond the Classroom

Research shows over and over again that optimal development for young children hinges on the quality of the settings where they spend their days. And quality depends not only on what happens in these settings, but also on the support and supervision available to providers and the policy and regulatory framework in which they work.

*Preschool for All* requires every participating provider in every community—whatever the age, educational needs, or eligibility status of the children and families served—to meet quality standards. At the same time, it provides structures and supports that help providers reach or maintain high standards. Illinois has also made an investment to support professional development, the credentialing of providers, and the monitoring of quality standards.

and its Build Initiative—for such systems reforms in Illinois and to address long-term governance and infrastructure issues that are key to improving and better aligning early learning, family support, health, and mental health services.

All the while, advocates kept their eyes on the prize: a comprehensive early childhood system that can support high quality programs and is easily accessible for families.

## Advocates and providers pulled together

Among the most important constituencies are early childhood program leaders and staff who work directly every day with children, and parents. National funding from Pew Charitable Trusts/Pre-K Now for the *Preschool for All* campaign in Illinois expanded advocacy groups' capacity to reach out to diverse communities across the state. Advocates in Illinois have always worked with preschool, child care and birth-to-three program staff to ensure that their voices, concerns, and day-to-day knowledge were reflected in policy proposals.

A core belief shared by advocates and funders was that services for children and their families must be rooted in the communities that contain and sustain them. Advocates traveled to communities around the state, engaging parents and community leaders of every ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic description and networking with groups representing many interests. They held hundreds of meetings and gave presentations on *Preschool for All* to seek input and share information with preschool and kindergarten teachers, child care providers, and civic and business groups; distributed frequent action alerts and policy updates; and generated local media coverage.

Advocates were committed to working with providers to shape the plan, making high-quality services available in settings such as child care where many children from birth to five were already spending their days, while bolstering the funding and infrastructure needed to ensure quality in those settings. Early in his term, Governor Blagojevich's administration worked with the Illinois State Board of Education to make it possible

for community-based agencies—not just school districts—to receive preschool funding, as long as they met program requirements. *Preschool for All* builds on existing community resources, making providers in a range of settings eligible for new funding. And parents have a range of preschool options for their young children.

Providers understood parents' priorities, says Judith Walker-Kendrick. "The child care community saw funding for early learning programs going to school districts, and knew that this could work to the detriment of parents. Parents have to work; they need high-quality care for children 52 weeks a year, from six in the morning until six in the evening. We needed to find ways to marry preschool and child care." This was not easy, since different, often

### Focus on Quality

"The glory of this wonderful country of ours is that there are fifty states and each one is different," says Libby Doggett, Executive Director of the Washington-based organization Pre-K Now. "Each one needs a different strategy. But there are many lessons that states can take away from Illinois' experience. Here is an important one: it is best to start with a high-quality program, even if it is small, and then expand it."

Doggett says that taking a high-quality program to scale is difficult, but not nearly so difficult as starting with a huge, inadequate program—one with lower standards for staff qualifications or child-teacher ratios—and then struggling to raise quality.

contradictory regulations governed the two types of programs, and the funding streams were separate. But here, and at many other junctures in this story, practitioners led the way. Years before, Tom Layman, a leader in the child care community, had persuaded the Chicago Public Schools to fund his Chicago nonprofit child care agency to operate a preschool program. After this, other Chicago child care programs received preschool funding as well, but in general, this practice was limited to Chicago and a few other districts around the state.

### **Against this canvas, Governor Blagojevich was able to paint with bold strokes**

By the beginning of the new century, the notion that the early years matter had become more mainstream, and policymakers had begun to focus on quality as well as access. Many Illinois families had access to affordable child care, and many preschoolers were able to attend state-funded early learning programs. In other words, a high-quality state preschool program served many at-risk, low-income preschoolers in Illinois, but not nearly enough. The Early Childhood Block Grant provided a framework for further growth, and had set a precedent by bundling together preschool services and preventive programs for infants and toddlers and funding a diverse delivery system.

As the 2002 gubernatorial campaign got underway, advocates worked with both major candidates to strengthen their plans. Democrat Rod Blagojevich won the election and quickly hoisted early childhood to the top of his policy agenda. Building on existing programs and funding mechanisms, he sought to extend the good programs available to

some Illinois preschoolers to all Illinois children. In the first three years of his administration, the Governor expanded child care eligibility and increased funding for the Early Childhood Block Grant by \$90 million. In 2003, he signed legislation establishing the Illinois Early Learning Council, charged with creating a voluntary preschool-for-all plan. Illinois Action for Children held a large rally where an energized crowd of parents and other supporters applauded these advances.

Within six months, the Council was up and running. Its 46 appointed members and approximately 200 committee members represented many constituencies and areas of expertise. The Council has been co-chaired by Harriet Meyer from the Ounce and Elliot Regenstein representing the Governor's Office. Staffing of the Council's prodigious efforts has been led by Margie Wallen, a longtime staff member at the Ounce. Five committees have met on a regular basis and focused on quality, evaluation and assessment, expansion, linkage and integration, and workforce development.

In 2006, decades of advocacy and planning culminated in passage of a \$45 million expansion of the Early Childhood Block Grant to launch *Preschool for All* in year one of a five-year plan. Up until the last moment, negotiations were intense. But in the end, the substantive *Preschool for All* legislation won unanimous approval in the House and was resoundingly passed in the Senate as well.

Building on the state's two decades of commitment to the birth-to-five years, the legislation amended Illinois' school code to establish "Preschool for All Children" as the goal of the state prekindergarten



program, and specified that in the expansion, top priority will be given to programs that primarily serve children at risk of school failure and children from low-income families. Next in line will be children from families that earn less than four times the federal poverty guidelines (\$80,000 for a family of four), followed by all other children. As *Preschool for All* expands, so will the state's services for at-risk babies and toddlers.

Collaboration is the recurring theme in this story. In the end, passage of *Preschool for All* hinged not only on the vision and leadership of the Governor, but also on legislators' broad support for many years and the activism of Illinoisans from every walk of life and every corner of the state. For advocates and policy analysts, the bill's passage was the culmination of years of strenuous, non-stop behind-the-scenes efforts.

### **But legislating doesn't make it so...**

The passage of *Preschool for All* and the increased investment in young children in Illinois is not an end but a beginning. The long, hard road of implementing the program well in diverse communities around the state and ensuring that quality is maintained remains to be traveled. The foundation is solid and the advocates are committed to working tenaciously to bring their vision to fruition in the years ahead. They know that to succeed, they must continue to make collaboration their touchstone.

Equity must be a constant concern because no single piece of legislation can level the playing field. To be sure, any program can apply to participate in *Preschool for All*, but when it comes to developing a proposal, some communities and agencies have

### **The National Perspective: A Linked Model**

"Illinois is a big success story," says Washington D.C.-based early childhood policy expert Joan Lombardi. "The dramatic increase in preschool access for three- and four-year-olds is terrific. And linking infant/toddler services for at-risk children to preschool is a critical step if we are really going to prevent an achievement gap."

Lombardi is excited about advances in Illinois because she sees the "linked model"—serving infants and toddlers with the greatest need, along with all threes and fours—as one of the field's best hopes for high-quality, comprehensive birth-to-five services.

Why was Illinois able to take this path? Lombardi points out that Illinois advocates had a history of working together for all children and strong commitments to addressing the needs of infants and toddlers. She recalls the birth of Early Head Start, an innovative program for infants and toddlers that was designed by a bipartisan Congress working with the Clinton administration. "When a set-aside was created in the federal Head Start legislation to fund Early Head Start for younger children, it set the precedent. Illinois advocates really understood the importance of addressing the full continuum from birth to five. They took the model of linking the funding of infants and toddlers to preschoolers and ran with it to make it state policy."

more resources and experience than others. Any individual provider can raise his or her qualifications, but some communities and agencies have a better shot at attracting and holding qualified staff than others. Any program can extend services to more families, but some communities and agencies have more access to appropriate space and facilities than others.

These are some of the challenges that lie ahead, and there are many more. No one is resting on laurels. The energetic Illinoisans who lifted early childhood high on the state's agenda remain hard at work. The Early Learning Council has a full agenda and collaborative advocacy efforts are still underway. At the same time, participants are thinking more and more about developing the next generation of policy analysts, strategists, and advocates.

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*As Preschool for All moves from the floor of the legislature to the floors, sandboxes, and story corners of early childhood programs, some of the most difficult challenges lie ahead.*

# What Lessons Were Learned?

## I. Build from Core Beliefs, Not Blueprints

The key advocacy organizations that contributed to advances in early childhood policies and programs have taken different tacks, focusing on different strategies, constituencies, and policies. They have been opportunistic, reacting to unfolding events (laws, policies, elections, opposition) and realities (research findings, developments in other states or other fields) with a variety of advocacy approaches, plans, and programs. They have compromised; they have shifted gears; they have taken advantage of opportunities. But they have never lost sight of the core beliefs and commitments that unite them:

- Supporting the optimal development of all young children from birth to age five;
- Aligning services with research findings on the components of high quality;
- Focusing first (but not exclusively) on young children at greatest risk of poor outcomes;
- Addressing all aspects of early childhood development, including social and emotional development; and
- Building an early childhood system with a strong infrastructure, not just programs.

The advocacy organizations articulated these shared beliefs from the outset, reaffirmed them over more than two decades, and made clear in every key negotiation that they would not compromise these principles.

When these core beliefs were at stake, the advocacy organizations showed that they were ready, if absolutely necessary, to walk away from government funding and other forms of support. To be sure, all were eager for progress in the realm of early childhood policy. But they agreed that if potential support or proposed policies affected only preschoolers, focused only on certain categories of risk, defined readiness narrowly, or addressed only programs and not infrastructure, then progress would have to wait.

When, on the other hand, the core commitments held sway, the organizations could agree to disagree with lawmakers, administrators, or funders about less crucial matters, showing flexibility and political agility.

Repeatedly, over the years, they sat down together to plan and coordinate policy initiatives and actions aimed at strengthening the quality of early childhood services; increasing funding for early childhood and family learning; influencing and educating opinion leaders; and opposing policies and laws that were not in the best interests of families with young children.

### **Lessons for funders:**

- Do not shy away from funding public policy work, including policy research and analysis, and advocacy. In many cases, the most leverage of your private investment comes from these activities.
- Provide sufficient funding so that organizations can develop bench strength in policy research and analysis.
- Fund organizations to sit down frequently at the same table with others that share their core commitments, but resist the temptation to dictate how or when they should meet.
- Trust that your grantees are generally more nimble than you can be when it comes to political strategies or policy options. Stay focused on your goal and avoid investments in prescriptive policies or programs.

### **Lessons for advocacy organizations:**

- Articulate clearly and repeatedly your core commitments.
- Form alliances with organizations that share your core commitments but don't be afraid to lead.
- Work out conflicts with your allies behind closed doors and resolve or agree to disagree about differences in strategies, tactics, or emphases.
- Seize opportunities and negotiate compromises that maintain the integrity of your core commitments.
- Know your bottom line. Be ready to walk away from support or partnerships when core commitments are violated.
- Assure that your positions and actions rest on a strong knowledge base. Build capacity in policy research and analysis, or partner with an organization that has this capacity.

## II. Build Leadership

The Illinois story is about leadership. *Preschool for All* was possible because Governor Rod Blagojevich and a bipartisan group of legislators were willing to act decisively. Getting there meant clarity about core convictions (early childhood matters) and courage in expressing those convictions (Yes—K-12 education needs fixing too, but the early years must be given priority).

The Illinois story is also about behind-the-scenes leadership. Moving a big agenda requires making it personal—telling the story in ways others will understand and relate to. Leaders are able and willing to communicate their passion and their goals to everyone they meet, both at the grassroots and grassroots levels and across political and organizational boundaries: to Democrats and Republicans; politicians and program officers; lawmakers and homemakers; board members and bureaucrats.

Community leaders play a crucial role by energizing and organizing parents, providers, and other community members to press for better early childhood policies and programs. Along with advocacy organizations, they play a role in educating political leaders, so that their good intentions become even better laws. Strong leadership in foundations is needed to ensure sustained, strategic support for all of these efforts.

### Lessons for funders:

- Give advocacy and public policy organizations the sustained support they need to nurture leadership within their organizations, including their boards, fostering creativity and invention and developing new voices.
- Provide the support advocates need to nurture leadership beyond their own organizations through efforts to educate elected officials, state administrators, community leaders, and leaders in related fields (such as K-12 schooling or mental health) about early childhood research findings and policy options.

### Lessons for advocacy organizations:

- Recognize the role of strong leadership in advancing your agenda—but do not wait idly until such leadership appears. Create the conditions that will make it possible for a strong public leader to be effective when he or she does step forward.

- Recognize potential for leadership on both sides of the political spectrum.
- Mentor promising staff within your organization, building leadership for the future. This may mean creating career ladders for advocates and policy analysts, and creating other incentives that keep effective individuals in the field.
- Focus on the quality of your board and the capacity of individual board members to communicate effectively the organization's vision and core commitments.

### **III. Focus on Relationships**

Illinois' successes required ongoing efforts to build relationships. An inclusive approach was crucial. Embracing diversity was crucial. If advocates had built relationships with legislators or candidates of just one party, or professionals on only one end of the preschool/childcare spectrum, or reporters from only one set of media outlets, or parents from only one economic stratum or one ethnic or faith community, they would have missed crucial opportunities.

Advocates in Illinois worked hard to understand deeply the needs and preferences of each constituency. Work with legislators at the state capitol, for example, reflected considerable thought about their perception of their own political viability and the concerns of their constituencies. Often, garnering support for the quality agenda in early childhood meant helping politicians figure out ways to follow their hearts.

Relationships with the individuals who staff state agencies, and who often stay on when elected officials leave, have proven especially important in Illinois, where state structures tend to have more sway over early childhood policy and program implementation than county structures.

A crucial ingredient of success in Illinois has been a sustained effort to build bridges among early childhood professionals who work with children in homes, centers, and preschools. Creating a comprehensive, high-quality early childhood system requires close work with the broad provider community at every stage of the process.

Building trust with journalists and media leaders has also been important for building public awareness and momentum. Advocacy organizations have taken care not to use the media to misrepresent the views of opponents or distort the evidence supporting their own positions. As a result, they have become trusted sources for the media.

### **Lessons for funders:**

- Provide sustained and sufficient funding for relationship-building. This work happens over time and requires adequate staffing, minimal turnover and diverse staff who can target their efforts and experiences.
- Look for ways to work together with other foundations and corporate funders and build relationships across sectors and fields.

### **Lessons for advocacy organizations:**

- Build relationships with individuals who are involved, day to day, in running programs. This can help to ensure that the policies and positions you support are attuned not only to legislative realities, but also to the realities of families and providers.
- Work with officials and lawmakers from across the political spectrum, recognizing that virtually all of their constituencies stand to benefit from a quality early childhood agenda. Help them find ways to strengthen their political viability by communicating support for early childhood.
- Build relationships with agency staffers and others who provide continuity and institutional memory when administrations change and policies shift.
- Identify key individuals in community-based organizations, congregations, unions, or other influential groups who can help communicate your goals and build trust.
- Focus on the personal stake individuals have in the well-being of young children (i.e., their children, grandchildren, future employees, etc.). Devote special attention to women and men in decision-making roles (i.e., legislators, state administrators) who have young children or family members who work in the early childhood field.
- Seek to understand the concerns of your opponents, and be prepared to seize opportunities when they are distracted or “asleep at the switch.”

## **IV. Take A Marathon Approach**

Advocates can be watchdogs—ready to pounce when policymakers or lawmakers make a misstep. In this role, they can intimidate decision-makers into moving in the directions they favor. Or, they can be part of the process, helping to shape an agenda and sharing accountability for outcomes. While advocates in Illinois have often been good watchdogs, they have more often taken the latter approach. They have made a commitment to work with others toward shaping and implementing, over years and even decades, policies and programs aligned with their core commitments.

In short, they have taken a marathon approach to early childhood policy, recognizing the incremental nature of progress and the sustained support required to achieve it. Children often appear to grow by leaps and bounds overnight, but parents know that their sudden “sprouting” has in fact resulted from months and years of nurture and care. So it is with policy.

The marathon approach requires discipline and restraint over the long haul. It is a developmental approach requiring attention to the whole (of an effort or agenda) rather than just its parts, recognizing that progress in the early childhood arena requires coordination and success in many venues and relationships with many constituencies. It requires sustained attention to the evolution of your own organization as well as collaboration with other groups. It requires co-existing with allies who may not always agree with you, as well as with opponents who may never share your point of view. It requires a great deal of listening—to parents, providers, politicians, and others. And it calls for celebrating success and building upon it.

### **Lessons for funders:**

- Establish your own area(s) of focus, investment, and expertise—but remain aware of the big picture and the way your grants affect (and are affected by) the work of other funders and organizations.



- Support grantees' organizational development efforts.
- Establish realistic timeframes and outcomes for grantees, recognizing the developmental and long-term nature of their work.
- Sustain funding over time, knowing that significant policy change happens gradually. Even when change seems sudden, the conditions that allow such change have evolved over time.
- Challenge grantees to take a holistic approach—considering the ways that the “parts” of the work they have taken on relate to the “whole” enterprise of quality early childhood.
- Recognize the need for continued advocacy and policy work after legislation is passed. Unless resources are available for aggressive follow-up, equity and quality concerns may get short shrift as implementation efforts move forward.

### **Lessons for advocacy organizations:**

- Establish your organization's area(s) of focus and expertise—but stay mindful of the big picture and the way your activities affect (and are affected by) others' activities.
- Think together—within your organization and with others—about how the field as a whole is evolving.
- Stay abreast of all facets of early childhood, including those oriented more toward policy and those focused more on program design.
- Borrow models that work. Adapt or refine strong policies or positions that have been articulated by others.
- During periods when other policy issues dominate the public consciousness, look for ways to connect the dots between those priorities and early childhood development.
- Take a long-term view to measuring success. It is often difficult, in the real world, to value progress over ownership, or collaborative success over credit. This takes leadership and a sustained focus on core commitments.
- Articulate and learn from mistakes!

## Resources

*Preschool for All: High-Quality Early Education for All of Illinois' Children.* Illinois Early Learning Council (Spring 2006).

To download a copy of the *Preschool for All* report: [www.illinois.gov/gov/elc/reports/Preschool-for-All\\_051006.pdf](http://www.illinois.gov/gov/elc/reports/Preschool-for-All_051006.pdf)

For a bound copy of the *Preschool for All* report, please contact Ounce of Prevention Fund, 312.922.3863 or [pubs@ounceofprevention.org](mailto:pubs@ounceofprevention.org)

For more information or copies of *Raising Young Children To the Top of the Policy Agenda*, please contact:

Ounce of Prevention Fund  
312.922.3863  
[www.ounceofprevention.org](http://www.ounceofprevention.org)

Illinois Action for Children  
312.823.1100  
[www.actforchildren.org](http://www.actforchildren.org)

Voices for Illinois Children  
312.456.0600  
[www.voices4kids.org](http://www.voices4kids.org)

McCormick Tribune Foundation  
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