

Illinois must increase early childhood investments

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By We, the Village Coalition

Illinois has a chicken-or-the-egg problem when it comes to increasing access and enrollment in our early childhood programs: Providers and schools cannot open more quality slots or extend services to families without more funding. Yet, some state policymakers are identifying lower enrollment as rationale for not increasing state funds to programs. If Illinois is ever going to truly recover from the impacts of the pandemic and rebuild to become the best state in the nation to raise young children, we must start increasing our investments now.

Far too many children, especially in communities of concentrated poverty, do not have access to the high-quality early childhood programs research has shown help children arrive at school ready to succeed. Findings from the bipartisan Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding make it clear that there is an urgent need for investment. Prior to the pandemic, there were nearly 1 million children under age 5 in Illinois; and among the state's lowest-income families only half (160,000 young children) were receiving early childhood education and care services.

Additionally, the Illinois early childhood workforce remains grossly undercompensated and starved for resources. The Funding Commission estimated additional billions of dollars are needed over time to equitably fund an early childhood education and care system. Though the state used federal relief dollars for early childhood programs to ensure doors could stay open, one-time lifelines do not sustain. It is imperative that as we re-engage families in programs to support their children's health and development – and so parents can go to work – we must also invest in the workforce providing these programs. One cannot happen without the other.

This dynamic is our present reality statewide, where enrollments are depressed, largely due to pandemic factors. Many programs have closed classrooms and waitlists because of staff shortages. Reducing or even maintaining current funding of early childhood education and care now, based on an assumption these programs aren't in demand, is the wrong solution. Our economy will not recover from the pandemic if we cannot attract or retain the workforce behind the workforce.

The Illinois General Assembly must invest in our state's early childhood system today. This includes:

- A \$54 million increase for the Early Childhood Block Grant in the Illinois State Board of Education
- A \$1.7 million increase for Evidence-based Home Visiting (Parents Too Soon, Healthy Families) in the Illinois Department of Human Services
- A \$41.1 million increase for the Child Care Assistance Program in the Illinois Department of Human Services
- A \$10.9 million increase to Early Intervention in the Illinois Department of Human Services.

We must increase funding in each of these areas to ensure businesses are open and that families and communities have the supports they need to thrive now and in the future.

Editor's Note: We, the Village Coalition is a statewide group of advocates, nonprofit organizations, child care providers, school districts, parents and others who have come together to fight for the well-being of Illinois' youngest children. We, the Village Coalition is powering the Right To Care Campaign. Visit RightToCareIL.com to see a list of participating organizations and to learn more.