READY NATION
COUNCIL FOR A STRONG AMERICA
ILLINOIS

January 29, 2020

Honorable J.B. Pritzker, Governor
Honorable Don Harmon, President, Illinois Senate
Honorable Michael Madigan, Speaker, Illinois House of Representatives
Honorable Bill Brady, Minority Leader, Illinois Senate
Honorable Jim Durkin, Minority Leader, Illinoi House of Representatives

Dear Illinois Leaders:

The Kindergarten Individual Readiness Development Survey (KIDS) is a statewide assessment of young children's readiness for school. But we also view it as an employment forecast – and a disheartening one, demanding our full attention.

In fall 2018, Illinois teachers rated only about one in four kindergarten students as ready for school in all of the key areas studied: math, language and literacy, and social-emotional development – basic skills that represent a foundation for success, both in school and eventually on the job. Left unchecked, school-readiness challenges can easily become significant workforce-readiness obstacles. This makes their prompt resolution a top priority for our state's approach to economic policy – and better yet, their prevention in the first place.

Gratefully, years of research and experience make clear the ways we can best aid skills development, especially among kids who face the greatest challenges and need help most. We Illinois business leaders want to thank you for the vital policy investments you have made in children and youth, and we encourage you to build further on these successes during this legislative session.

We are among the 2,600 business executives, across the country, who comprise ReadyNation – a nonprofit, nonpartisan network committed to strengthening the quality and stability of our workforce by focusing greater attention on research-proven investments in kids. We offer the following recommendations for inclusion in Illinois' FY2021 state budget for the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), Department of Human Services (DHS), and Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC):

Early care and education - We are heartened that the Governor has appointed an expert commission to study the long-term scope of resources needed for filling Illinois' early care and education gaps, an effort we strongly support. In the meantime, we urge several interim investments of further help for young children:

- **Preschool and birth-to-3 programs** – An increase of at least $150 million in ISBE's Early Childhood Block Grant could help bolster not only preschool, but critical birth-to-3 services statewide – another step toward improving their reach, quality, and equity. Even after years of important, incremental expansion, far too many families still lack access to the help they seek for grounding their young children in good early learning experiences. This increase would take the grant total to $693.7 million.

- **Child care assistance** – Workforce stability and productivity hinge, in part, on working families' ability to access affordable, reliable care for kids while their parents are on the job. As our state continues to rebuild from deep, 2015 cuts in the DHS Child Care Assistance Program, its caseloads remain tens of thousands of children below historical levels – but they're heading in the right direction, and Illinois should continue to build on recent improvements in families' eligibility and program quality. An increase of at least $50 million in FY21 would help this essential program to keep moving forward.

- **"Parent coaching" services** – The DHS-administered Healthy Families Illinois (HFI) and Parents Too Soon (PTS) programs support voluntary, home-visiting efforts for the new and expecting parents of at-risk children, from birth to age 3. But their state funding has been stagnant for years, and they continue to reach only a fraction of the households that could benefit. We request a $2.37 million increase in HFI and $1.62 million boost in PTS to meet more of the demand for these important services, bringing their combined total to $20.9 million.

- **Early Intervention** – These are vital therapies for young children with developmental delays and disabilities. Increasing their help by $25 million would help meet growing needs, particularly among youngsters exposed to lead. It could bolster low provider compensation and support data-system improvements, while bringing EI resources to a total of $133.6 million.

Elementary through post-secondary education

- **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. A $5.4 million increase to extend these DHS services further would raise the program to $19.6 million and bring resources closer to the level of support they enjoyed before years of cuts and neglect. Similarly, our state should redouble efforts to strengthen after-school offerings through ISBE.

- **Career & Technical Education** – At the very least, Illinois should maintain its investments in these experience-based learning opportunities for middle and high school students, administered through ISBE. This past year brought a $5 million increase in CTE programs that help familiarize youth with promising careers and the job skills they entail. Growing these resources, over time, can only help bolster workforce quality even further.

- **Postsecondary financial aid** – Monetary Award Program (MAP) grants help low-income students to access college. But too few students who qualify for this help actually receive it, and MAP assistance covers far less ground than it once did. An FY20 increase in these grants was a big step forward, and should be followed with a further, $100 million boost in the coming year to help more of the young people who need postsecondary education and training for the careers they seek.

These priorities have enjoyed bipartisan support over the years, reflecting their value and their backing in research. We ask that the FY21 Illinois budget reflect their importance once more, representing another investment in the well-being of not only children and families, but our workforce and economy statewide. We thank you for your service to Illinois, and we look forward to working with you in these regards. We'd also be interested in meeting to discuss these priorities, and can follow-up shortly with your offices.

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