

For release: 11 a.m. CT, Thursday, March 4, 2021

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Business leaders: Improve racial equity in Illinois' workforce by investing in equitable early childhood priorities

Execs release new report, urging greater opportunities for children of color

Chicago, IL - March 4 – Addressing racial inequities in young children's learning is vital not only to their success in school, but to helping resolve unfairness in our state's workforce and strengthen our economy, says a group of Illinois business leaders.

These members of the ReadyNation network of business executives gathered Thursday for a virtual event, releasing a new report entitled: "Improving Equity & Opportunity in Illinois' Workforce: A business case for helping advance racial equity via early childhood investments." (Available at <http://bit.ly/equity-IL>.)

They praised several policy efforts already underway while calling for still further steps to bolster early care and education opportunities for young children of color, who too often lack them. This includes the work of a bipartisan, statewide commission that's sending the Governor recommendations for extensive improvements in a range of early childhood supports.

"Efforts at improving equity can work best when they start early in the lives of our future entrepreneurs and workers," said Rudy Valdez, Engineering Manager at Kaney Aerospace in Rockford.

"To ensure fairness in our workforce and full opportunity in our economy, we must *act* on our knowledge about the interconnected nature of 'cradle' and 'career,'" added Joshua Gunn, President & CEO of the Peoria Area Chamber of Commerce and the Peoria CEO Council.

Workers of color account for one-third of Illinois' workforce, according to the ReadyNation report. But they bear a disproportionately large share of the state's economic challenges — from lower average pay to higher unemployment rates. Furthermore, the COVID pandemic has exacerbated some of these challenges.

There are many daunting factors behind these disparities, from systemic racism to poverty and trauma. But the possible solutions are many, too. They include greater attention to the needs of young children of color, who represent 49 percent of Illinois' youngest learners and face outsized challenges of their own.

Only three out of every 10 Illinois kindergarteners were fully prepared for school as they began their education in fall 2019, the report notes. This is a startling statistic — and was even more pronounced among Black youngsters (23 percent), Latino children (17 percent) and English learners (14 percent). These figures reflect a lack of school readiness in skill sets that are vital to success in classrooms and careers, alike: math, language and literacy, and social-emotional development.

Too often, achievement gaps between students of color and their peers persist as young people progress through school, ultimately extending to lower graduation rates.

“This is more than just bad news for individual kids, their families and futures,” said Joni Duncan, a human resources executive with 25 years of experience in the Chicago-area health care sector. “It’s also troubling for our state’s entire economy — especially considering our growing population of Black and Brown families. We truly need to do better.”

Research shows that strong investments in early education can help dramatically shrink racial gaps in such school-entry skills. Yet, early childhood program access and quality both call for improvement, as well as more intentional efforts to reach those most in need of help, said Lisa Savegnago, President of Nameplate & Panel Technology in Carol Stream.

For example, she said, about three out of five Illinoisans live in a child care “desert” (where eligible children outnumber licensed, available slots by 3:1 or more). But, among Latino families, the figure of those in child-care deserts climbs to about two out of three, and even higher in some communities. Meanwhile, chronically low pay fuels high turnover in the early childhood workforce, undermining program stability and quality for children.

Thankfully, state leaders have begun taking further steps to invest in greater early childhood equity, including a package of education measures championed by the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus and approved by the General Assembly and awaiting the Governor’s signature. Among other things, this legislation established aims for strengthening diversity in, and support for, our early childhood workforce, as well as important social-emotional supports for young children.

The ReadyNation report also recommends:

- **Further boosting early childhood workforce development and compensation**, especially considering this labor pool’s heavy reliance upon women — and women of color, in particular;
- **Still greater focus on meeting foundational, prenatal-to-3 needs** of children and families, as envisioned by the five-year policy agenda of Illinois’ public-private PN3 initiative; and
- **Taking bold steps in pursuing big-picture, systemic reforms** of early childhood services, such as those represented in the unfolding work of a bipartisan body that’s studying programs’ funding and governance. The Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding, appointed by Gov. Pritzker in late 2019, has been studying and compiling recommendations for long-term improvements.

The COVID pandemic has underscored the crucial, workforce value of such priorities as child care and preschool. ReadyNation members praised the efforts of the Governor and other state and federal policymakers to extend extra assistance to cash-strapped providers of such services, but noted that much more help is necessary — underscored by the pandemic’s disproportional effects on Black and Brown families.

“Helping youngsters of color to reach their full potential in learning and life is a just and smart investment in helping our entire workforce and economy to, in turn, reach *their* full potential,” the ReadyNation report concludes.

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ReadyNation is a nonprofit, nonpartisan network of more than 3,000 business leaders across the country – including 275 in Illinois – who focus on strengthening our workforce and economy through research-proven investments in kids. It is part of the Council for a Strong America, a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites several organizations (including law enforcement and retired military leaders) to promote solutions ensuring that children can be successful, both in school and beyond. The “Improving Equity & Opportunity in Illinois’ Workforce” report is available online at <http://bit.ly/equity-IL>.