READY NATION
COUNCIL FOR A STRONG AMERICA
ILLINOIS

Strengthening business through
effective investments in children and youth

For release: *10 a.m. CT, Friday, March 11, 2022*
Media contact: *Kate Buchanan — cell: 773-330-1178, kbuchanan@readynation.org;*
Sean Noble – cell: 312-502-5566, snoble@readynation.org

Illinois business leaders: Boost workforce & economy through early childhood investments

New report urges action on bipartisan commission's ideas for child care, preK, birth-to-3 priorities — a "good business plan" for economic recovery

Chicago, IL - March 11 – Recovery of our workforce and economy demands that Illinois pursue an expert, bipartisan plan for improving our early childhood system, a group of business leaders announced Friday.

A new report from the ReadyNation Illinois group points to the recommendations issued by the state's Early Childhood Funding Commission nearly one year ago — a blueprint for strengthening access, equity, and quality in our system of early care and education.

"Two years of pandemic pressures have worsened long-standing problems in child care and other early childhood supports — problems that affect children, working parents, their employers and our entire economy," said Wendy Pfiel, President and CEO of the Greater Belleville Chamber of Commerce and a member of the nonprofit ReadyNation organization. "But the commission's recommendations represent a good path forward, a good business plan, for resolving these challenges."

"Manufacturers have more than 800,000 open jobs across the United States, underscoring the significance of these issues," said ReadyNation member Sarah Hartwick, Vice President of Education & Workforce Policy for the Illinois Manufacturers' Association. "It will take years of investment, hard work, and commitment to realize the commission's suggested improvements in the early childhood system that's so critical to the stability and success of our workforce. The time to act is now, building on some important first steps our state has taken."

The report *Early Care & Education: A Business Imperative* reiterates extensive research demonstrating the economic significance of child care, preschool, and vital birth-to-3 services. High-quality services support the workforce of today by increasing employees' attendance and productivity, as well as giving parents the peace of mind they need to fully engage in their jobs. Early care and education also shape the workforce of tomorrow by laying the skills foundation for academic and career success.

Research shows that high-quality early learning opportunities develop both technical skills and "soft skills," such as teamwork and perseverance. These programs are more important than ever, with State Board of Education data showing that only three out of 10 Illinois kindergartners were considered fully ready for school entry in fall 2019; the results were even more troubling for low-income students, children of color, and English learners.

However, nagging deficiencies in programs' access, quality and equity prompted Gov. Pritzker to appoint a bipartisan commission in late 2019, tasked with studying and suggesting improvements in our system of

birth-to-5 services. Business leaders representing ReadyNation joined other partners in testifying at hearings and town-hall meetings in support of this effort.

Among other things, the commission found our state is spending only about 14 percent of what's truly needed for a fully funded early childhood system. Its recommendations called for an investment of far greater resources, in addition to consolidating the system's multiple funding streams and governing agencies to improve focus and efficiency.

"Now that we have this plan in hand, it's crucial that we put it to good use," said Ashley Villarreal, a ReadyNation member who is Executive Director of the Kankakee County Chamber of Commerce. "Delaying action means tapping the brakes on our own economic recovery at a time when our workforce and employers need help the most."

Indeed, ReadyNation's research shows that — even before the pandemic — child care challenges were costing Illinois' economy about $2.4 billion annually: costs related to workers' foregone earnings, employers' reduced productivity, and other factors. And this price tag accounted only for problems emanating from insufficient infant-and-toddler care.

The good news is, Illinois has taken some early steps toward improvement. In addition to important, short-term measures to preserve child care during the pandemic, fueled by federal pandemic-relief dollars, the state recently launched a Birth-to-Five initiative of regional-planning councils to identify local needs and discuss ways of meeting them.

Further momentum is necessary, ReadyNation members said, including top priority on improving the compensation of early childhood teachers and staff — a significant "workforce behind the workforce." Low pay and benefits have too long undermined the quality and stability of services.

To this end, ReadyNation has joined several allies in requesting a 10-percent increase in resources for key, early childhood programs as part of the state's FY23 budget. These include not only preK and child care, but two sets of birth-to-3 services: voluntary, home-visiting programs that offer "coaching" help to new and expectant parents, and Early Intervention therapies for youngsters with developmental delays or disabilities.

Such an FY23 increase would serve as a "down payment" toward further realizing the commission's long-term vision for early childhood system improvements, said ReadyNation members, who also recently testified before the Illinois Future of Work Task Force on these topics.

Joining ReadyNation for Friday's report release was George Davis, former human services director for the City of Rockford, who co-chaired the 29-member Early Childhood Funding Commission.

# # #

ReadyNation is a nonprofit, nonpartisan network of more than 3,000 business leaders across the country – including nearly 300 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 "Early Care & Education: A Business Imperative" report is available online at ***tinyurl.com/5h3m2ke6****.*