

December 2022

Honorable J.B. Pritzker, Governor
Honorable Emanuel “Chris” Welch, Speaker, Illinois House of Representatives
Honorable Don Harmon, President, Illinois Senate
Honorable Tony McCombie, Minority Leader, Illinois House of Representatives
Honorable John Curran, Minority Leader, Illinois Senate
Members of the Illinois General Assembly

Dear Illinois Leaders:

As business executives from all parts of Illinois, we write to share a series of FY2024 state budget recommendations based on research as well as our concerns for the well-being of our workforce and economy.

Early childhood care and education have risen to the top of HR concerns for businesses throughout the state as employers struggle to hire and retain qualified staff. The lack of accessible and affordable child care is keeping parents of young children from fully participating in the workforce and thereby shrinking the talent pool for employers. The struggles of employers and employees alike make it clear that early childhood services form a foundation on which all other business sectors rely.

An inadequate early learning system is also detrimental to our hopes of preparing the workforce of tomorrow. Only about three out of 10 children entering kindergarten are fully prepared for school success in early math, language/literacy, and social-emotional development, according to 2021 Illinois data — the very skills on which both academic and professional achievement depend. Furthermore, disparities remain troublingly pronounced among children of color, low-income households, many rural areas, and other communities of need.

To address these challenges, our nonprofit, nonpartisan, ReadyNation network of 2,000+ business leaders throughout the country — over 270 of them in Illinois — supports greater, research-proven investments in the well-being of children and families. Many of these are reflected in the recent recommendations of an expert, bipartisan commission on early childhood funding. We support its suggestions for improvement in the resources, funding structure, and governance of birth-to-5 programs. We similarly support the wise, birth-to-3 policy recommendations of the Raising Illinois initiative.

The policy priorities below represent significant, further steps toward recalibrating Illinois’ system of early childhood education and services to better meet the needs of children, their families — and, in a very real sense, businesses and our overall state economy.

We urge you to increase state funding for key early childhood programs by at least 20% in the FY24 state budget. Such an increase would help put Illinois on the path toward closing the demonstrable gap in early childhood resources as recommended by the Early Childhood Funding Commission.

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• **Preschool and birth-to-3 services:** We request an increase of at least \$119.6 million in the Illinois State Board of Education’s Early Childhood Block Grant, which supports preK for tens of thousands of 3- and 4-year-olds, statewide, as well as Prevention Initiative services aimed at helping the parents of at-risk infants and toddlers — critical ways of laying a skills foundation for youngsters’ success in school and in later life. It is particularly vital to boost the chronically low compensation of early childhood teachers and other staff to help address the early childhood workforce shortage, and to improve professional development and credentialing. Other priorities include increasing the number of full-day preK slots and extending Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation services to more kids, families, and educators.

• **Child care:** An increase of at least \$82.1 million for the Illinois Department of Human Services’ Child Care Assistance Program, supporting child care for the working parents of approximately 100,000 children from birth to age 12, statewide. High-quality child care has consistently been shown to improve educational outcomes for children, setting them on a trajectory for school and later career success. Workforce stability, productivity, and recovery demand that we reverse the erosion of affordable, reliable care for children while their parents are on the job. We applaud the Administration’s moves to strengthen the program’s reach and workforce support in response to the COVID pandemic, and we encourage the extension of further such measures.

• **Evidence-based home-visiting services:** A combined increase of \$3.6 million for two DHS-administered programs, Healthy Families Illinois and Maternal Child Home Visiting. These provide voluntary “parent-coaching” for the families of at-risk children, from birth to age 3, to build resilience and reduce adverse childhood experiences, like abuse and neglect and parental substance abuse (often associated with later drug use). These initiatives help connect families with other appropriate services and resources, such as substance abuse treatment. Additionally, as plans for the state’s opioid-lawsuit settlement dollars are being made, we encourage policymakers to prioritize the drug crisis’ youngest victims and hardest-hit communities by committing some of those forthcoming resources to home-visiting and Early Intervention programs.

• **Early Intervention:** An increase of \$23.2 million for these vital therapies for young children with developmental delays, disabilities, and neonatal substance exposure to help meet their growing DHS caseloads, bolster low provider compensation, and support data-system improvements.

In addition to these early childhood priorities, we encourage your support of the following **elementary-through-postsecondary education requests**:

• **Afterschool programs:** Afterschool programs, such as Teen REACH, have helped raise participants’ grades and graduation rates while providing youth with safe, positive environments during out-of-school hours before most parents are home from work. Increasing Teen REACH in the DHS budget by \$2.8 million would raise these programs closer to the level of support they enjoyed before years of cuts and neglect. We similarly should maintain ISBE’s afterschool funding at \$20 million and prioritize that funding for teens and youth who most need their help — particularly in low-performing school districts.

• **Postsecondary financial aid:** Monetary Award Program grants help low-income students to access college, but too few students who qualify for this assistance actually receive funding, and it covers far less ground than it once did. In 2002, MAP grants covered 100% of tuition and fees at Illinois’ public institutions of higher education for all MAP-eligible applicants. In order to move closer to this target, it is

essential to build further on last year's investment of \$122 million, continuing to increase investments to ensure students can rely on the full funding promised to them.

Each of these priorities has enjoyed bipartisan support over the years and public support for investments in early childhood remains strong and widespread. Polling conducted in fall 2022 demonstrated that four out of five Illinois voters consider early childhood care and education to be a good use of public resources.

We hope to work with you on these wise investments in the well-being of children and families, our workforce and economy, paying important dividends over time. We thank you for your service and dedication to our state.

Sincerely, the undersigned Illinois business leaders and members of ReadyNation –

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