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Report: Link Between Early Childhood Obesity Prevention and National Security

Military Leaders Discuss Importance of Early Childhood Education

Springfield, IL — On Tuesday, October 8, the Adjutant General of the Illinois National Guard and retired senior military leaders from Mission: Readiness visited the District 186 Early Learning Center and released a new report on how investments in early childhood education can improve military readiness. The retired military leaders are members of a non-partisan national security organization of more than 750 retired admirals and generals committed to high quality early childhood programs that ensure kids stay in school, stay fit, and stay out of trouble.

The report, entitled “**Unhealthy and Unprepared in Illinois: National security depends on promoting healthy lifestyles from an early age,**” [<http://bit.ly/Healthy-Illinois>] shows that 70 percent of Illinois’ young adults between the ages of 17 and 24 are unable to join the military — with obesity accounting for almost half of that total.

“We know this: Our men and women in the armed forces do amazing work under tough conditions. They must be healthy and physically fit in order to meet the rigorous physical and mental demands of their jobs,” said retired U.S. Air Force Brigadier General Mark Rabin.

The military leaders presented the latest research regarding military recruiting shortfalls; the benefits of obesity prevention measures beginning very early in life; and how Illinois lawmakers can prioritize investments that enhance early childhood education, reduce obesity, and aid national security.

“Early learning centers have an important role in starting children off right by helping them make healthy choices,” said retired U.S. Air Force Major General William Cobetto. Children as young as two are experiencing rising obesity rates, the report finds. Among this age group, the obesity rate is 14 percent. In Illinois, the rate of obesity for 10- to 17-year-olds was 16 percent in 2017.

“We will not have a sufficient pool of talented recruits to serve in our military in the future unless we support the early learning, healthy eating, and physical activity these young children are enjoying here every day,” said retired U.S. Air Force Brigadier General John Sheedy. The report states that while parents can help cultivate children’s healthy eating and physical activity habits, schools are also key to curbing the obesity epidemic. That makes early care and education settings, such as preschools and child care, essential venues for promoting nutrition and physical activity.

The Illinois Adjutant General was a guest at the event. In this role, General Richard Neely is the Director of the Illinois Department of Military Affairs and is the Governor's principal advisor on military affairs. Of the report, he said, "In order to give all Illinoisans all options, it is crucial that we invest early on. This will help guarantee that more Illinoisans could serve in the military if they wanted to."

The Adjutant General and retired military leaders then participated in the children's daily physical activity.

Illinois has a history of bipartisan support for strengthening early childhood education and care to match families' needs and parents' choices. In the latest state budget (FY20), progress continued with a \$50 million statewide boost in resources for the preK and birth-to-3 services supported by the Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) within the Illinois State Board of Education. The Springfield Early Learning Center is a recipient of ECBG funds.

Despite the increased support for early childhood programs, too many of our youngest learners are entering their formal education years unprepared. The most recent Kindergarten Individual Development Survey data found that only one in four kindergartners were found to be developmentally ready for school.

The retired senior military leaders called on state policymakers to continue prioritizing investments in programs that promote nutrition and encourage physical activity from an early age. They pointed out that reaching more children and families with early childhood programs will help ensure more of our young children enter kindergarten and start life healthy and better-prepared for success.

Mission: Readiness is a nonpartisan organization of more than 750 retired admirals and generals strengthening national security by ensuring kids stay in school, stay fit, and stay out of trouble.