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As Many As 27,000 Children Cut From Preschool in New State Budget Plan

The latest budget proposed by the Illinois General Assembly cuts as many as 27,000 children – most of them from low-income families – from Preschool for All programs. That is nearly the equivalent of the entire undergraduate student population at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

In Springfield last week, House Democrats proposed a 30 percent cut to programs, including early childhood education, in an effort to balance the budget. The Early Childhood Block Grant, which funds the state's Preschool for All program, would take a significant hit. Preschool for All currently serves about 90,000 children at 1,547 programs operated by local school districts and community-based agencies.

"Illinois has one of the worst achievement gaps in the nation, and these cuts to preschool funding will make it that much more difficult for tens of thousands of low-income children to enter school with the skills they need to graduate high school and enter college or the workplace successfully," said Diana Rauner, executive director of the Ounce of Prevention Fund. "It's shameful that our state's schoolchildren are paying the price for the state's fiscal crisis, and it is unconscionable that we're ending proven programs for children who need them the most."

A 2008 study by the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University found that 17% of children in Illinois under age 6 live in families with incomes below the federal poverty level. This means that 186,971 of the state's youngest citizens are at risk of entering school unprepared to learn to their fullest abilities.

High-quality preschools, like the programs funded through Preschool for All, provide valuable learning opportunities that far too many low-income children don't otherwise get. Illinois has been a national leader in providing research-based programs that help children build skills such as persistence, learning how to focus, taking turns with classmates, following a routine, early language, and early number skills—abilities that kindergarten teachers say are vital to helping young children succeed in the classroom.

"These are programs available to working, low-income families who just don't have the means to pay for quality preschool on their own," Rauner said. "By stripping away these programs, the state is robbing these children of a fair chance at the education they need to break the cycle of poverty."

The Illinois State Board of Education estimates a loss of 5,000 to 7,000 preschool teaching and staff jobs, adding to the immediate economic impact of the proposed cuts to the Early Childhood Block Grant.

Also, the cuts in preschool programs threaten the future economic health of the state. Economists unanimously say that now, when the budget is tightest, is when states should be investing public dollars in programs such as early childhood education that have the best long-term return on investment. Every dollar spent on high-quality early-childhood programs for disadvantaged children creates \$7 to \$9 in future savings. At-risk children with quality early-learning opportunities are less likely to need special education and more likely to graduate from high school, earn more money and contribute more tax dollars. Effective early childhood development programs help reduce teenage pregnancy, crime, and other social burdens.

“Ultimately, the state is going to pay a heavier price in costly remediation services,” Rauner said. “When you look at taking away the potential economic contributions of what is the equivalent of an entire public university’s student body, it doesn’t get any clearer that these cuts just aren’t good public policy.”

The Ounce of Prevention Fund gives children in poverty the best chance for success in school and in life by advocating for and providing the highest quality care and education from birth to age five.

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