

Harriet Meyer, Ounce of Prevention Fund
U. S. House of Representatives – Committee on Education and Labor
March 17, 2009

Good morning. I am Harriet Meyer, President of the Ounce of Prevention Fund and Co-Chair of the Illinois Early Learning Council. Let me begin by thanking you for the historic investments Congress has made in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, and for the opportunity to speak with you today. This funding will truly help states both improve their economies now while investing in the futures of young, at-risk children. This is no longer a cliché. Investment and intervention during the earliest years does indeed change education and life outcomes.

The Ounce was founded 25 years ago by the businessman and philanthropist Irving Harris. Irving was far ahead of his time in his talking about brain development, the importance of very early childhood, and its later impact on educational outcomes. He shared this understanding with businessmen and legislators, including a State senator who eventually became the President.

Research tells us that the achievement gap is measurable and apparent by 18 months. We know that verbal skills are essential to success in school, but at age 4, children in poverty know a fraction of the words that middle-class children do. We know that the differences between these groups are unchanged at age 5, age 12, and beyond. Many poor children suffer from chaotic, stressful environments without the attention and stimulation they need to develop. At 18 months, a child in a low-income family hears about 3 million words a year while a child in a higher income family hears 11 million. That difference translates to a gap of over 30 million words by age 4.

And it is not just the quantity but the quality of the language and the interactions behind each word that define a child's ability to communicate when he enters school. Think about what you hear in the grocery store as you watch a mother navigate the aisle with her toddler. It is a full-blown discussion about what kind of cereal to buy and whether it is healthy. Middle class parents narrate their day. We need to help all parents to do the same. This means we need to bridge the opportunity gap well before a child enters preschool if we are serious about ever improving high school graduation rates. Too often, children start kindergarten without the social and emotional skills and academic preparation needed to take full advantage of what school has to offer. They are forced into a cruel game of catch-up that few will win.

So what are we doing in Illinois to close the achievement gap?

Based on a blueprint created by the Illinois Early Learning Council, legislators enacted Preschool For All. Our guiding principles were to make high quality, voluntary preschool progressively available to all 3- and 4-year-olds, with priority for those most at risk of school failure. Like the Federal Early Head Start program, we began at birth by expanding birth to three programs for at-risk infants and toddlers at the same time we grew preschool programming. Demand has been so strong for birth to three programs, that we are looking to increase the amount this year. Preschool for All is unique because it builds on existing programs. Those programs range from non-profit and for-profit child care centers and homes, to school and community-based PreK, to Head Start and Early Head Start centers, to home visitation programs - with an overriding focus on setting high standards of quality and helping programs to meet them.

The Council set forth research-backed recommendations. Our standards require BA-level certified early childhood teachers and ongoing professional development in all settings for all age groups. Small group

sizes and high teacher-to-child ratios ensure that teachers can attend to the needs of each child. Curricula aligned with the Illinois Early Learning Standards are required to help children enter kindergarten well prepared to learn. Teams of monitors and on-site consultants ensure that program standards are met. Staff regularly communicates with parents about each child's progress and documents families' involvement in a wide range of parent education activities. In Illinois, close to 100,000 preschoolers and 16,000 vulnerable infants and toddlers are currently benefiting from these standards.

We sustain these programs through deep investments in things which we know achieve quality. Funding supports scholarships to help teachers obtain credentials and ongoing training and consultation. The Illinois State Board of Education has allocated over \$1 million for the Erikson Institute of Chicago to evaluate results and identify trends to guide future policy decisions and make program corrections. Preschool for All funds pay for certified teachers in all of our infant-toddler and preschool classrooms. At Educare of Chicago – a high state-of-the-art full day and full year program serving 150 at-risk children from birth to five - students are achieving significant improvements in vocabulary, early literacy, and school readiness skills, bringing them closer to their more-advantaged peers. By comparison, most of the nation's low-income, at-risk children begin school well below average on readiness measures.

All of this costs more in the short term, but quality of service is what it takes to get long-term results. It is the only way we will ever get our poorest children scoring at the national average. We already know how hard it is to catch children up if we rely on remediation after they enter our formal education system.

Preschool for All is an ambitious undertaking, and we have not yet fully implemented all of the Early Learning Council's recommendations. We need better information systems to monitor and improve programs. We need increased funding for family support workers, who partner with parents – especially those with special needs or who are from linguistic and culturally diverse backgrounds - to access health and social services and make successful transitions from home or child care to preschool and to elementary school. Lastly, we must create an integrated early childhood system that offers families with very young children better access to the highest quality services and supports.

The time for early childhood investments is now. Every other industrialized country supports families in an intentional way so families can do what they are meant to do: raise children to be productive, educated, tax-paying members of our society. The truth is that many education reforms fail. Our civic institutions and workplaces need the participation and productivity of all our nation's children. We know how to do this. The research is clear and models have been created. Many need only be tweaked to improve and start producing real results. Programs not meeting our national commitment must be jettisoned.

We are getting closer to setting a new direction for the next generation by increasing investments in early learning. We will know we've achieved success when:

- All children, especially those most at risk, have access to high-quality early education programs beginning at birth
- Families can choose from a range of options that best support their role as a child's first and most important teacher
- Only the best teachers and caregivers are educating and nurturing young children
- Sustained funding for research-based early education is recognized as a vital part of our nation's education system

Most importantly, we'll know we've achieved success when children enter school with a love of learning and the skills they need to succeed.