



## The Build Initiative in ILLINOIS

*The Build Initiative is a multi-state partnership that helps states construct a coordinated early childhood system that responds to the needs of young children from birth to five and their families, so that children are safe, healthy, eager to learn and ready to succeed in school. Build serves as a catalyst for change and a national resource on early care and learning. As a partner in Build, Illinois receives grant money and technical assistance to support early childhood system building.*

### Background

Early childhood stakeholders in Illinois have a long history of working together. The **Ounce of Prevention Fund** initiated the Birth to Three Project in 1998, partnering with government agencies and other key stakeholders to weave a wide range of programs and services into an effective statewide system. Consequently, the Project became a recognized leader, connecting programs and services across the state and regularly convening more than 300 practitioners, advocates and government agency staff to address early childhood systems issues.

In January 2003, the Birth to Three Project became the Birth to Five Project as Illinois joined the Build Initiative as one of four original Build states. The Ounce of Prevention Fund became the lead organization for Build's early learning systems work in the state.

### Early Learning Partnerships

The expanded Birth to Five Project brought more than 100 additional individuals into strategic planning activities in Illinois. This resulted in more than 400 stakeholders working together to advance the early learning agenda.

Important partnerships continue to be forged and strengthened, including close working relationships with the offices of Governor Rod Blagojevich and Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley. The Project worked with the Governor and the General Assembly to create the Illinois Early Learning Council and with Mayor Daley's office on his early childhood initiative *Born Learning*.

### System-Building Planning and Progress

Despite serious budget constraints, recent legislative sessions have produced successful results for early childhood in Illinois. Significant new funding was secured for prekindergarten and child care programs. Income eligibility for child care assistance was updated, and eligibility for low-income health insurance was expanded. New legislation established a Children's Mental Health Partnership and the Illinois Early Learning Council. The Governor has made early childhood a top priority in his administration by investing \$90 million new dollars in early childhood education, including funding for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. The Governor's Office is working closely with the Early Learning Council to develop an ambitious initiative to provide quality, voluntary preschool to all three- and four-year-olds and to expand services for at-risk infants and toddlers. The public/private Council, co-chaired by the Governor's Office and the president of the Ounce of Prevention Fund, has the overall charge

of expanding, enhancing and coordinating programs and services for children birth to five and helping to ensure long-lasting change and the development of an early childhood system.

With the *Essential Elements of Quality Preschool for All* agreed to by the Early Learning Council in July 2004, Illinois is excited about the commitments made to early childhood. Other recent accomplishments include expanding the definition of eligible providers for preschool funding to include community-based settings as well as schools; increasing the mandated set-aside of Early Childhood Block Grant funding for children birth to three years old to 11 percent; launching *Gateways to Opportunity*, the Illinois Early Care and Education Professional Development Network; and developing a social emotional component in the regional Child and Family Connection Offices, the entity responsible for Part C – Early Intervention services.

The Birth to Five Project has established long-range and intermediate outcomes to be achieved, and baseline data have been collected from state agencies. A strong emphasis has been placed on developing a comprehensive system that encompasses education and care, social and emotional development, maternal and child health and nutrition, specialized services, parenting and family support, and community services such as libraries and parks.

A number of policy and financing changes have been made to address gaps and barriers in Illinois' early childhood system and to facilitate collaborative planning and linkages at the state and local levels. Government agencies have taken steps to coordinate, enhance and expand early learning services, and legislators and government agency leaders have become educated about and increasingly committed to key early childhood issues.

The Birth to Five Project is working to supplement, strengthen and coordinate existing collaborations, not replace them. Through relationship building and a commitment to clarify responsibilities and areas of action, stakeholders are moving forward together.

## Challenges for the Future

The environment in Illinois is receptive to early learning system building. The work of Build and the Birth to Five Project has moved many system pieces into place, and critical linkages have been identified or established. A comprehensive approach to meet the needs of Illinois' children and families continues to require a substantial commitment of time and energy to develop infrastructure and systems, which the Build Initiative will help accomplish. Long-term success will depend on adequate funding, the continuing leadership and participation of Project partners, supportive public policy and public will.

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To learn more about the Birth to Five Project or Build Initiative work in Illinois, please visit [www.ounceofprevention.org](http://www.ounceofprevention.org), or contact:

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