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POLICY BRIEF RELEASED

Stark Mismatch Found Between Growing Population and Available Early Childhood Education Programs

Lack of Facilities in Latino Neighborhoods Found as Major Barrier to Access Early Childhood Education Programs

CHICAGO- A Policy Brief released by Latinos United reveals a striking disparity in access to high-quality early education programs in communities with large Latino populations across the Chicago metro region. The brief indicates Latino children lag behind other children in preschool enrollment and school readiness. It also identifies major barriers for Latino families to enroll their children and provides a set of recommendations to address these challenges.

Findings indicate that only 35.6 percent of eligible Latino children participate in preschool in Illinois, far below the state average of 52.5 percent for other children. In addition, data on the supply of child care centers across Latino communities shows that in Cook County, by zip code, there are only 2.4 child care centers operating per 1,000 Latino children under the age of five. Furthermore, in Chicago, more than 6,000 Latino children are on waiting lists because schools are too overcrowded to offer preschool services.

The state of Illinois has made efforts to expand access to early childhood education by allocating \$135 million toward funding for preschool programs since 2002. However, Latino children continue lagging behind. "It is time to eliminate the school readiness gap for Latino children and set them on a real trajectory of school success through the creation of strategies and initiatives to target underserved communities," stated Maricela Garcia, Executive Director of Latinos United. State Representative Cynthia Soto indicates that, "The goal of the state of Illinois to make preschool accessible to all children must become a reality for Latino children."

Many barriers exist that prevent Latino families from accessing high quality early childhood education programs including, the lack of linguistically and culturally competent programs and the facilities and infrastructure to operate these programs. "A lack of educational opportunities is among the greatest challenges facing Chicago's Latino community," said Ricardo Estrada, Executive Director of Erie Neighborhood House. "We must take bold steps to assure Latino families have access to equal opportunities."

To begin to close the educational gap, Latinos United urges the General Assembly to increase the Governor's proposed FY08 budget with an additional \$25 million to build facilities in underserved communities. The capital funds would target the areas with the highest numbers of underserved children. These targeted funds would pave the way to build or renovate early childhood education facilities in grossly underserved communities. Potential areas include: Aurora, Cicero, Berwyn, Joliet, Waukegan, Chicago Heights, Mount Prospect and Chicago. "This policy brief is a call to action," said Senator Martin Sandoval. "The General Assembly must commit funds in the state budget to build or renovate facilities in the communities with the largest number of underserved children, which happen to be Latino communities," stated Senator Sandoval.

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The purpose of Latinos United is to improve the quality of life for the Latino community by removing obstacles to opportunities and highlighting the contributions made by Latinos to the region and state.