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## **Latino Children Face Sharp Disparity in Preschool Access *Yields Early & Costly Achievement Gaps***

**CHICAGO – November 16, 2010** – Just one in three Latino parents in Illinois can find a preschool slot for his or her child, compared with almost two-thirds of other parents, according to a new report out today. Sharp disparities in preschool supply in heavily Latino neighborhoods contribute to wide gaps in early learning – even before children enter kindergarten, researchers said.

“We know that quality preschool prevents delays in children’s language and pre-literacy skills,” said Bruce Fuller, a coauthor of the study and a University of California professor. “What’s disturbing is the unequal availability for so many Illinois youngsters.”

Disparities in the early learning of Latino children also stem from low levels of maternal education and home practices that fail to advance pre-literacy skills, according to researchers. Two-thirds of the Latina mothers participating in the federally sponsored study had no formal schooling beyond high school, and this predicted slower rates of development. The findings stem from a 2005 U.S. Department of Education study tracking 380 Illinois families with young children that included parental interviews and preschool data.

These and other results are set for release today at Chicago’s DePaul University at a meeting of policy makers, education advocates and journalists, co-hosted by the Latino Policy Forum and Berkeley’s Institute of Human Development, in cooperation with the Education Writers Association. The study and meeting were funded by the McCormick Foundation.

“We’re seeing significant cognitive gaps between Latino children and their peers. Those gaps start in preschool and grow during the years of formal schooling, as evidenced by persistently high drop-out rates in high school,” said Sylvia Puente, executive director of the Latino Policy Forum. “Preschool – and certainly quality, linguistically-appropriate preschool – can help level the playing field, but Latino students must be enrolled in these programs to reap their benefits.”

The reasons behind disparities in preschool enrollment are as complex as they are numerous, but simple access remains a core challenge. Data from the National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics reveal a consistently lower enrollment capacity in preschool centers found in predominately Latino Cook County zip codes, compared to predominately- African-American or White communities. Even as recent legislation – including the passage of a capital bill that lowers match requirements for school districts and nonprofits to tap a \$45 million early childhood education construction fund – bodes well for the availability of new facilities in Latino and other high-need areas, Illinois’ ongoing fiscal woes have created a backlog in payments that threatens the existence of current early childhood education programs.

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What's more, access disparities contrast sharply with an encouraging new mandate that brings linguistically appropriate education to Illinois' English-language learners – many of whom are Latino – and the promise of the growing popularity of dual-language in middle-class communities across the state.

### **Illinois' New Bilingual Pre-K Mandate**

Even if access to preschool were not an obstacle for Latino children, not all preschool programs are created equally. Given research showing that solid academic foundations are built in students' home languages, the Illinois Board of Education (ISBE) drew praise from across the country this summer after mandating home-language instruction for preschoolers. The new approach, to be fully implemented in 2014, will apply to all public, school-based or school-funded early childhood education programs serving more than 20 preschool-age ELLs.

"ISBE's forward-looking stance on bilingual education builds from a generation's worth of empirical research," said Fuller. "We know that allowing young children to develop a strong base in their home language allows them to excel in other academic areas – without seriously delaying their transition to English."

Research also indicates that highly-qualified teachers can make all the difference in the experience of a young learner. Indeed, the dual-endorsement requirement in Illinois' new rules – teachers working in preschool classrooms will need training in both early childhood education and bilingual education – will connect Illinois' most qualified teachers with the students who need them most.

### **Dual-Language Learning in Chicago's suburbs**

Paradoxically, as enrollment and cognitive gaps persist for Latino youth, the popularity of dual-language (DL) programs – programs in which classroom time is split equally between English and a second-language, often Spanish – is growing in middle-class suburbs, where children from monolingual English-speaking homes are poised to become the first in their families to master another language.

Over the past two decades, nearly 50 DL programs have taken off in Illinois alone. The approach, has garnered favorable reviews among researchers, who cite that children are able to maintain – and gain literacy in – their home language while they become fluent in a second language. School administrators cite growing popularity – and subsequent waiting lists – for the DL programs in their districts.

"We started our dual-language program in 2001 with 31 kindergarten students and a fair amount of caution expressed by parents of both language backgrounds," said Kristina Davis Salazar, Director of Second Language Learning, West Chicago District 33. "But nine years into our dual-language program, our kindergarten program is full with 58 students. And, we have waiting lists of English and Spanish speaking students whose parents seek this well-established program so that their children may become bi-literate and bicultural."

### **Latino Students in Illinois**

One-in-four Illinois children under the age of 5 is Latino, and one-in-three babies born in the Chicago region has a Latino parent – statistics that have dramatic implications for early childhood and bilingual education in Illinois. Linguistic data for Illinois' preschool-age learners hasn't historically been collected, but ISBE's kindergarten numbers speak to the importance of linguistically-appropriate education for young learners: Across the state, nearly 20 percent of Illinois kindergartners are ELLs, and that number jumps to 36 percent in Chicago.

“It's encouraging to see that Illinois families – and Illinois legislators – are embracing the utility of bilingualism,” said Sylvia Puente, executive director of the Latino Policy Forum. “But at the same time, children whose first language is not English, many of them Latino, are still face distressing obstacles in succeeding academically – they're among the least likely in our state to be enrolled in preschool, and many are starting school six months behind their peers, cognitively speaking. Illinois has done well to embrace bilingualism. Now it must make sure that Latino students are in these trailblazing, bilingual classrooms.”

### **About New Journalism on Latino Children**

The New Journalism on Latino Children (NJLC) project unites top researchers, journalists and local thought leaders in enriching civic understanding and media coverage of how Latino families can be better served by Metro Chicago's emerging early childhood education system. NJLC is led by the University of California's National Panel on Latino Children and Schooling and supported by the Education Writers Association and the Chicago-based Latino Policy Forum, with funding from the McCormick Foundation.

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