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Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge funds will target the state's neediest children

CHICAGO – December 6, 2012. Governor Pat Quinn today announced Illinois has been awarded a $34.8 million Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge federal grant from the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to support quality early childhood education in Illinois.

Illinois was one of only 14 states selected for the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge. The grant funds will help Illinois connect children most at risk of school failure with high-quality early learning programs.

"Illinois has been a leader in early learning for decades and we will now be able to further strengthen that leadership through the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge," Governor Quinn said. "The achievement gap begins before a child steps into kindergarten. Empowering our children with a solid education foundation before they begin kindergarten is the most crucial investment we can make in a future workforce that will drive economic growth in Illinois."

The Illinois State Board of Education, Department of Human Services and Department of Children and Family Services will work together to improve the quality of all early learning and development programs in the state through this grant. The federal grant will be used to: create a new Quality Rating and Improvement System to inform parents about program quality through a website that will be fully implemented in July 2014. In addition, the grant will help communities connect children with the greatest needs to high-quality programs, strengthen the quality of early learning programs, and support the development of great teachers for early learning programs. These funds will also allow the state to make important one-time investments to improve efficiency, streamline program administration and data systems and evaluate effectiveness for early childhood programs.

"Making sure young children and their families get the support they need to prepare children for success in school and later life requires coordinated effort from all of our agencies," said Illinois Department of Human Services Secretary Michelle Saddler.

"Early childhood funding is one of the best investments we can make for the success and prosperity of future generations and our Illinois economy," said State Superintendent of Education Christopher A. Koch. "These funds will allow us to improve our infrastructure to better serve early learners and make more efficient use of state resources toward that purpose."

Illinois was one of five states eligible to compete for the second round of the grant, which was submitted in October to the U.S. Department of Education. The state was one of 35 states to apply for the first round of funding and was found eligible to apply for the second round based on its performance.

Illinois' application is designed to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of early childhood education in Illinois by taking a patchwork of early learning programs and integrating them into a unified system and increasing early childhood program quality—making sure that all programs provide quality education and helping already good programs become great.

To learn more about the Illinois plan for the Early Learning Challenge, please visit: http://www2.illinois.gov/gov/OECD/Pages/EarlyLearningChallenge.aspx

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