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Urban League lawsuit gains statewide plaintiffs, Latino community support

CHICAGO, IL (October 16, 2008)-The Chicago Urban League has filed an amended civil rights lawsuit against the State of Illinois and the Illinois State Board of Education in the Circuit Court of Cook County. The amended lawsuit adds 12 families from across the state whose children are impacted by poorly funded schools. The Tri-County Urban League of Peoria also joins the suit. The original lawsuit, filed in August by the Chicago Urban League and Quad County Urban League, seeks a court order declaring that the current system of funding public education in Illinois is unconstitutional and a violation of the Illinois Civil Rights Act of 2003. The amended lawsuit has also gained the support of leaders in Chicago's Latino community. Details of the amended lawsuit were discussed today at Roberto Clemente Community Academy.

"Today our lawsuit has been strengthened by 12 diverse families from around the state of Illinois who are fed up with the poor quality education their children receive due to the State's discriminatory funding model," said Cheryle R. Jackson, president and CEO of the Chicago Urban League. "We are also pleased to have the support of many leaders in Chicago's Latino community. This is a fight that transcends race, class and geography. We must be united to win this battle."

Jackson was joined by elected officials, civil rights advocates, ministers, education advocates and administrators including: Alderman Billy Ocasio (26th Ward); Alderman Manuel Flores (1st Ward); Alderman Rey Colon (35th Ward); Miguel del Valle, Clerk of the City of Chicago; Sen. Iris Martinez (20th District); Alberto Carrero, member, Chicago Board of Education; Theodia Gillespie president and CEO, Quad County Urban League; and Laraine Bryson, president, Tri-County Urban League. Parents of children in poorly funded public schools who recently joined the lawsuit of co-plaintiffs also attended today's announcement.

"Our community is tired of a funding system that so deprives our schools that our students have to share books, and are so overcrowded that our schools are more daycare centers than learning institutions," said Alderman Ocasio.

Theodia Gillespie, president and CEO of the Quad County Urban League added, "The current system of funding for our schools does not work. Elected officials in the state of Illinois have a responsibility to make sure all children receive a high quality education, regardless of their address or socioeconomic status."

About the lawsuit

In court documents, the Chicago Urban League asserts that the civil rights lawsuit has been filed because of the State's failed school funding scheme, the discriminatory impact that the scheme has on minority students, especially African American and Latino students and the inadequate educational opportunity it creates for thousands of Illinois public school children.

The lawsuit challenges the State's method for raising and distributing education funds to local school districts and the Illinois State Board of Education's implementation of the system. Represented on a pro bono basis by the law firm of Jenner & Block LLP, the Urban League asserts that the State's public school funding scheme (1) disparately impacts racial and ethnic minority students who attend Majority-Minority Districts in violation of the Illinois Civil Rights Act of 2003; (2) violates the Uniformity of Taxation provision of the Illinois Constitution; (3) violates Plaintiffs' right to attend "high quality educational institutions" guaranteed by the Education Article under the Illinois Constitution and (4) violates Plaintiffs' right to equal protection under the Illinois Constitution.

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The Chicago Urban League and their co-plaintiffs want the court to agree that the public education financing mechanism in Illinois violates the Illinois Civil Rights Act and Illinois Constitution and order the State to take the necessary steps to eliminate the constitutional violation and remedy the statutory violation.

“The children all across the state of Illinois are entitled to a quality education that focuses on excellence,” said Laraine Bryson, president of the Tri-County Urban League. “Adequate funding that is equitable across all districts is required to make this a reality for all children regardless of race. We demand nothing less than the best for the leaders of tomorrow.”

Engagement across racial, class lines encouraged

Jackson, citing the widespread support the lawsuit has gained, encouraged more individuals and families to educate themselves about the disparities in school funding and to encourage elected officials to support revamping the current system. “Whether you have a child in public schools or have the luxury of sending them to the school of your choice, we must all be engaged in this lawsuit and join in this fight for our children’s future. Anyone who wants our vote now and in the future must commit to fixing this broken system. The entire community benefits when all of our children receive a quality education.”

More information about the lawsuit, frequently asked questions and Illinois school funding facts can be found on the Chicago Urban League website (www.thechicagourbanleague.org).

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About the Chicago Urban League

Established in 1916, the Chicago Urban League is a civil rights organization that empowers and inspires individuals to reach and exceed their economic potential. The Chicago Urban League supports and advocates for economic, educational and social progress for African-Americans through our agenda focused exclusively on economic empowerment as the key driver for social change. For more information, visit www.thechicagourbanleague.org.

About Jenner & Block LLP

Jenner & Block is a national, full-service law firm with approximately 500 attorneys and offices in Chicago, New York and Washington, DC. Founded in 1914, the Firm has grown and prospered because of an unwavering commitment to our clients, to the Bar, to our people and to public service. Jenner & Block has been widely recognized for consistently delivering excellent legal representation in the courtroom and the boardroom. The Firm has also traditionally served as a leader in public service and pro bono advocacy, having been consistently ranked as one of the top ten pro bono firms in the country by The American Lawyer magazine. In 2008, The American Lawyer recognized Jenner & Block as the number one law firm in the country for pro bono service.