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For immediate release:

Community-based program builds bonds between teachers, neighborhoods

Chicago, Feb 9, 2009 – Seeking to continue the growth of a groundbreaking educational initiative, teacher candidates of Grow Your Own Teachers will rally for increased funding in Springfield on Wednesday, Feb 18, from 11:30 am to 12:30 pm.

Funded by the state, Grow Your Own (GYO) recruits candidates from low-income neighborhoods where schools have trouble retaining qualified staff. In these areas, GYO unites community groups, higher education institutions and school districts. The state funds provide forgivable loans that help put the candidates through college so they can obtain teaching certificates. In exchange, they agree to teach for at least five years in neighborhood schools.

Organizers expect 150 teacher candidates from GYO's 16 partnerships, eight of them in the Chicago area and eight in other high-need areas around the state.

"We have made remarkable strides during the first few years of this effort," said GYO director Anne Hallett, who is urging the General Assembly to increase funding to \$4.5 million in 2010. "We understand these are tough financial times, that the state coffers are strained. But GYO is a landmark approach to recruit, prepare and place highly qualified new teachers from the community in the classroom, and will pay long-term dividends to state taxpayers. Illinois children, schools and communities will benefit several times over from this investment."

GYO intends to prepare 1,000 new community-based teachers in the classroom by 2016. It was established to combat a disturbing national problem shared by schools in low-income areas—the difficulty to retain highly qualified teachers. Staff turnover in these communities can be as high as 40 percent per year. An initiative like GYO can save schools as much as \$50,000 per teacher annually in recruiting and hiring costs.

The innovative partnership approach to teacher recruitment and training -- which unites 16 community organizations, 8 public universities, 4 private colleges or universities, 12

community colleges, 23 school districts and 2 unions -- has the potential to become a national model.

In 2008, GYO attracted the attention of educators in Arizona, California, Mississippi, and New Jersey, who visited Chicago and are in the process of studying or trying to replicate the Illinois initiative.

"This program benefits low-income communities by investing in the assets of their greatest resource -- their own residents -- to affect change in the classrooms," said Hallett, pointing to GYO's many benefits, including creating a pipeline of highly-qualified teachers of color for state classrooms (85 percent of candidates are people of color) and strengthening the bond between school and community. "These individuals live in these neighborhoods and bring tremendous passion, knowledge and insight to their new careers. GYO helps these concerned community residents in realizing their dreams of becoming teachers."

Hallett pointed to an individual like Marivel Igartua, a recent GYO graduate who found her inspiration to become a teacher from a restaurant billboard.

"There's one thing I kept telling myself -- difficulties mastered are opportunities won," Igartua said. "I kept saying that in my head because [the program] was so difficult."

Although the 44-year-old Chicago resident did not realize that the quote originally came from Winston Churchill, she knew that it helped her get through seven years of going to school at night, while holding down a part-time job as a tutor and raising three children.

Teaching does not come easily to program participants -- even someone like Igartua, who said she "always thought about" becoming a teacher but was prevented from earning her credentials because of financial difficulties.

Morgan Halstead, an academic coordinator with the program, saw Igartua grow into it. "It can be hard for a 22-year-old to learn to be a teacher," Halstead said. "For older women with kids and a job and a husband, it's extra challenging ... She had to realize that she had teaching inside of her, and when she found out that it was, it was easy for her to succeed."

Igartua has three children -- aged 25, 16 and 13. She typifies GYO candidates. Of the 500 GYO teacher candidates enrolled in 2007, 82% were female, 87% had at least one child and the average age was 39 years old.

Halstead remembers an incident about 1½ years ago that told her something about Igartua. "I remember seeing her telling a new student, 'It's hard work but you can do it,' and I said to myself that she had moved toward being a teacher."

"GYO is transforming the education and future of children who need good teachers the most," said Madeline Talbott, lead organizer of Action Now and a force behind the 2004 Grow Your Own Teacher Education Act. "We're going to Springfield to make sure that

the General Assembly knows this is succeeding, and allows us the opportunity to present even more people with the chance to help their schools and communities."

For more information about the rally and Grow Your Own, visit www.growyourownteachers.org.