

For Immediate Release

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GYO's teachers in training make trip to rally for more funding in Springfield

Members of Chicago-based group meet lawmakers as the General Assembly proclaims it GYO Day.

CHICAGO – Nearly 200 supporters of Grow Your Own Teachers (GYO) flooded the Capitol rotunda in Springfield to ask state lawmakers for more funding for their trail-blazing and cost-efficient approach to teacher-training.

“Let ‘em know – GYO! Let em know – GYO!” chanted the group, as the animated GYO contingent – the first group to visit the state house this new legislative session – was addressed by a litany of elected officials who vowed to fight for more money on behalf of the Chicago-based initiative.

“We really hit the jackpot with GYO. I saw a potential for great things to happen and look where we are now!” said State Sen. Iris Martinez, who sponsored the Grow Your Own Teachers Act of 2004. “It makes me proud to know that something that was once a concept, an idea, a seed is now a success! GYO is a great investment in our communities, a wise investment by the taxpayers of Illinois.”

Funded by the state, Grow Your Own recruits non-traditional 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.

GYO intends to prepare 1,000 new community-based teachers in the classroom by 2016. The program has 16 partnerships, eight of them in the Chicago area and eight in other high-need areas around the state. The program can save low-income school districts, where teacher turnover can be as high as 40 percent, as much as \$50,000 per teacher per year in hiring and recruiting costs.

The group’s trip to Springfield contained a busy agenda: a press conference where senior GYO staff addressed members of the media; a boisterous hour-long rally under the

capitol's ornate rotunda; and individual meetings with lawmakers, who are facing tough decisions preparing the state's budget in these uncertain economic times.

Perhaps as a positive omen of funding to come, the General Assembly proclaimed Feb. 18 Grow Your Own Teachers Day in Illinois.

"This program fills a real need in our classroom and communities," said Madeline Talbott, lead organizer of Action Now and a key figure in nurturing GYO into creation. "The best thing is our initiative has multiple benefits - to the residents, to the kids, the schools, to the neighborhoods. Everyone gains from GYO's work."

Despite the financial crisis the state faces, lawmakers kept an optimistic outlook for GYO, which is urging the General Assembly to increase state funding to \$4.5 million in 2010. GYO's current budget is \$3.5 million.

"Even though we have an economic crisis, I know GYO's future is bright," said State Rep. Esther Golar, who also sponsored the 2004 Grow Your Own Act. "I'm here to celebrate you and your leadership for all the great work you've done. Our schools will benefit from all that you do."

The fruits of GYO's labor were on full display, as candidates and graduates told their powerful stories of the challenges, sacrifices and triumphs that come with pursuing the dream of becoming a teacher in the Illinois school system.

"GYO has helped me in ways I never knew possible," said Nikki Moore, a single mother of three and GYO graduate now teaching in the Springfield school system. "GYO had my back all the way. They are doing great things for future teachers. They provide a way for someone like me to get an education who otherwise may not. With more funding, the sky's the limit for GYO!"

GYO's rally and cause even drew the attention of influential House Speaker Michael Madigan.

"Thank you all for coming here today. Thank you for all you have done for your communities," said Madigan, a lawmaker who will play a pivotal role in the budget process. "You are to be commended for all the hard work that you do."