

State Journal-Register

Our Opinion

Published Tuesday, February 14, 2006

Preschool plan should be implemented

ALMOST NO ONE would argue against the wisdom of making sure that all of our state's children are immunized against the various diseases that could otherwise threaten their lives.

We make sure young people receive immunizations for at least two reasons. First, of course, to protect their health. Secondly, in the long run, the cost of an immunization program is minuscule compared to the cost of a measles, mumps or whooping cough epidemic.

Such foresight is good for the individual and for society.

The cost of providing high-quality educational opportunities for the state's 3- and 4-year-olds can be defended in much the same way.

GOV. ROD BLAGOJEVICH committed early in his tenure to improving preschool education in Illinois. Over his first three years in office, Blagojevich has pushed for and won \$90 million in new funding for quality preschool programs.

That investment has opened preschool programs to about 25,000 additional 3- and 4-year-olds, with overall preschool enrollment in Illinois climbing to 75,000. This emphasis not only has won Blagojevich accolades from preschool proponents, it also has managed to provide access to quality preschool programs to the children at highest risk of academic failure.

At-risk and economic disadvantage tend to go hand in hand. It makes sense to offer the preschool programs first to those who most need them.

But as important as a good early start in school can be for a student of limited economic means, preschool is a vital resource for young people of all social and economic backgrounds.

WITH THAT IN MIND, Blagojevich is now asking the General Assembly to provide \$45 million additional dollars each of the next three years - \$135 million total - in an attempt to provide quality preschool programs to all 3- and 4-year-olds whose families desire such education.

"We now provide preschool to almost all at-risk 4-year-olds in the state. But preschool makes a big difference for middle-class families as well - families who work hard, pay their taxes and play by the rules. These are the same families whose children don't have health care, because they fall through the cracks. They make too much money to qualify for help from the state and not enough to afford health care or preschool for their children. They deserve our help," said Blagojevich in announcing his universal preschool program.

WE REALIZE this is a golden campaign issue for Blagojevich, but even the governor's harshest critics cannot deny that he has consistently fought for better preschool in Illinois. And rightfully so. Long-term studies have shown students enrolled in high-quality preschool programs are 20 percent more likely to graduate from high school and are less likely by age 18 to become involved in criminal and/or violent activities. One of the most impressive findings is that preschool programs can reduce the number of special education placements by a whopping 41 percent.

Figures like that make it easier to believe the claim that for every \$1 spent on early child-care programs our society will see a savings of more than \$7. Special education and prison are extremely expensive propositions. A person's potential gone unfulfilled can be even more costly.

Blagojevich proposes paying for the program through natural revenue growth, better tax collection methods on certain corporate taxes and by closing a tax loophole on landfills that produce and sell electricity. Without further study, we cannot determine if these are feasible funding measures. But we do believe the state should find a way to implement this vital initiative.