

Daily Southtown – guest column
Thursday, February 23, 2006

We can't afford *not* to fund preschool

By Maria Whelan, Harriet Meyer and Jerry Stermer

We appreciate that the Daily Southtown recognizes that, regarding preschool, "all the children in the state need this opportunity, including those parents who can't afford it" ("Blago preschool plan has merits," Feb. 17 editorial). We agree with you that "this is a fine concept." Still, it is not, as you imply, a question of which priority you fund. Children cannot wait.

Each year we do not act, thousands of children lose the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get what science tells us is critical to lifelong learning. New brain research shows that children start learning long before they cross the threshold of a classroom. Learning begins at birth, and our kids should not be denied the chance to get the early start they need that will make a difference for a lifetime.

By bolstering early learning now, we will make the dollars spent later work more effectively. Early education has a high return on investment — 16 percent, according to Art Rolnick, senior vice president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis.

But that's not all. Over the years, we will get a better-prepared work force and reduced social costs — courts, prisons, drug rehabilitation, remedial education, to name a few. The costs of not moving forward with this ambitious proposal are far greater than those proposed by the governor.

As you stated in your editorial, "it (preschool) is needed, and this is a program that could do wonders for children." The fact is early education gives kids a real advantage — making them ready to learn and succeed in school and in life. How will we fund it? How can we not?

Maria Whelan is president of Illinois Action for Children; Harriet Meyer is president of Ounce of Prevention Fund; and Jerry Stermer is president of Voices for Illinois Children.