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## **Free preschool? 'Can't afford not to,' gov says**

**BY MARK J. KONKOL Staff Reporter**

A gaggle of squealing toddlers played at Gov. Blagojevich's feet Sunday as he furthered a pitch to create a state-funded universal preschool program for 3- and 4-year olds, regardless of how much money their parents earn.

His Preschool for All plan calls for \$135 million in state funding over the first three years of a five-year rollout aimed at offering at least partial-day preschool to 190,000 children.

"Giving children a chance at a good quality education is not only the key to success in America, but it's something all of us should be willing to roll up our sleeves and fight for," Blagojevich said at a news conference at St. Vincent DePaul Center.

With overwhelming support from education advocates, Blagojevich promised the preschool plan would be the cornerstone of his coming budget proposal. He even hinted that he might force lawmakers into legislative "overtime" -- as he did for more than 50 days in 2004 -- if he doesn't get his way.

### **Is it 'closing corporate loopholes'?**

If lawmakers support the free preschool plan, Illinois would become the first state to offer every 3-year-old child "access to a doctor and a teacher," the governor said.

Blagojevich expects some resistance in Springfield from lawmakers complaining the state can't afford it. But the governor said he remains confident he'll be able to win over lawmakers and secure the needed funding to make it happen.

Preschool for All would be funded by a combination of increased revenue from an improving state economy, tapping surpluses in about 700 corporate funds and closing "corporate loopholes," including a provision that allows companies to write off 5-year-old losses on income taxes without state oversight, he said.

One of Blagojevich's potential rivals, Republican gubernatorial candidate Ronald Gidwitz, issued a statement Sunday calling the plan a campaign stunt.

"There is no dedicated funding source except for fund raids and loophole closings. The governor's last loophole closing meant imposing taxes and fees on business," Gidwitz said.

### **Or 'strangling Illinois employers'?**

"In his language, loophole means 'noose.' He has been strangling Illinois employers and the jobs they create from the first day he got into office. Free preschool for children but unemployment for parents is the wrong trade-off."

Blagojevich said the state "can't afford not to do it," pointing to studies that say kids who go to preschool are 20 percent more likely to graduate high school, and more than 40 percent less likely to need special education and be arrested as a juvenile.

Currently, state-funded preschool only targets kids from poor families or kids otherwise academically at risk.

Blagojevich said Preschool for All will help working-class families that make between \$35,000 and \$75,000 a year but can't afford preschool programs that can cost more than \$10,000 a year for two children.

Politics aside, getting kids to school at an earlier age is the right thing to do, Voices for Illinois Children President Jerome Stermer said.

"Which of our children should we deny this important opportunity, when we know from the science and from our guts and the morality of the question that every child deserves [to go to preschool]?" Stermer said.