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VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

Give all the opportunity to learn early

Providing "Preschool for some" (Editorial, Feb. 16) misses the point about the governor's "Preschool for All" proposal: what is education, when should it begin and how do we provide it?

All children matter, no exceptions, and educating them has been long viewed as a fundamental right. Every child, no matter where he lives or how much money his parents make, should have the option of a free education.

New brain research shows that children begin learning long before formal schooling begins. It's time that our definition of education catches up to proven science.

Preschool for All is visionary. It's voluntary. It gives all young children the opportunity to begin learning early.

Parents want what is best for their children, but too many are unable to choose quality preschool. In Illinois, 80 percent of 3- and 4-year-olds live in families

that earn \$35,000 a year or less. These families struggle to pay for private preschool because they don't qualify for state-funded programs.

The fact is that Preschool for All would target children most in need first, typically those in low-income families, and then reach out to other children who are unserved.

History and experience suggest that upper-income families will continue to send their children to private preschools or keep them at home, as is their choice. The assumption that parents who can afford private preschool will yank their children out and place them in the state program is just wrong. Parents understand the importance of young children's relationships with their teachers, and disrupting that relationship doesn't make sense.

In the early 20th Century, American leaders believed high school was critical to the survival of our democracy, so they made it available

to everyone. Now that we know the benefits of early education, can we do less?

A voluntary universal program is necessary because problems with school readiness are not confined to low-income children. Preschool for All would mean high standards and high quality for all children.

Preschool for All sets a bold vision for what is best for all of our children. Anything less leaves some children out. We wouldn't dream of telling some 3rd graders that they don't deserve an education. It's equally unthinkable to deny any child the opportunity for quality early learning.

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