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## EDITORIALS

### VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

#### Early childhood education is worth it

In "Budgeting our financial ruin" (Commentary, June 6), columnist Dennis Byrne questions whether early childhood education is worth what it will cost. The answer is obvious: Absolutely it's worth it!

Funding early education prepares our newest generation to succeed in educational careers and go on to become contributing members of our society and economy. It levels the field for at-risk children and fills the gaps in preschool programs.

Early childhood research has consistently pointed to the earliest years of life as a crucial stage in child development. Studies have shown that children who attend pre-kindergarten programs are less likely to repeat a grade or fall into the criminal justice system, and are more likely to graduate from high school than comparable children who do not attend early-education programs.

As any parent will tell you, finding a good, affordable preschool is one of the most

stressful challenges any family faces.

As any kindergarten teacher will tell you, far too many children start school already behind.

Yes it will cost money to give every child equal access to quality preschool. But supporting early education isn't just good policy, it's also good business.

Investing early in our children pays off in the long run. A recent report shows how for every dollar spent on early care and education, government sees a savings of \$17, \$11 of which is crime costs.

The 2006 state budget expands our nationally regarded preschool program to reach 8,000 at-risk children currently not being served. Despite a grim economy, Gov. Rod Blagojevich and the General Assembly have demonstrated true courage and have prioritized a proven strategy to help children who need our support the most.

Even with new funding for at-risk preschool, however,

thousands of eligible children will still fall behind because their schools and communities do not have enough programs to serve the children who need them. We have made progress but are far from finished.

You bet we will be back, year after year, to ensure a commitment from our elected officials that there is an ongoing investment in our children. As long as there are children under 5 years old who need a strong start in life that helps provide them with a better future, advocates, parents, law-enforcement leaders, educators and business and other community members will be back.

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*President*  
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*President*  
*Voices for Illinois Children*  
*Chicago*