

Two reports endorse investment in early childhood education ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A pair of reports released this week offered supporting arguments for one of Democratic Gov. J.B. Pritzker's top priorities: increasing investment in early childhood education.

Both reports, one by a group of law enforcement officials and another by leading business executives, use data from the Illinois State Department of Education that shows roughly three-fourths of all students entering kindergarten in Illinois lack necessary school readiness skills in at least one of three critical areas – social-emotional development, literacy or math. Only about a quarter of all new kindergarteners demonstrate school readiness in all three categories.

Because of that, the reports argue, many of those children fall behind in their early elementary years and have difficulty throughout their school careers, leading to a wide range of social problems, including a lack of workforce skills and a higher propensity to get involved with crime later in life.

"Research has shown that high-quality early childhood education can result in more successful outcomes, particularly for at-risk children from low-income families," wrote the authors of the first report, "Illinois' Path to Prosperity."

That report, written by a group of law enforcement officials known as "Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Illinois," suggests children enrolled in quality preschool and child development programs are more likely to complete high school and significantly less likely to be arrested for violent crimes after they become adults.

"Illinois spends \$2.3 billion each year to house adults in prisons and jails, and experiences violent crime at rates 15 percent more than the national average," the organization said. "One solution we have to combat this epidemic is investing in our youngest residents: research shows that children who participate in high-quality early childhood programs are more likely to succeed in school and less likely to commit crime later down the line."

The second report, released Wednesday by a group of business executives called ReadyNation, argues early childhood education is an important component of workforce development because it lays the foundation for the kinds of "soft skills" like social and emotional development that are critical for success later in life.

"If not addressed and resolved, these school-readiness issues can easily turn into workforce-readiness issues that – down the road – are very literally bad for business," Jeff Griffin, president of the Peoria Area Chamber of Commerce, said during a news conference in that city where the report was unveiled.

Both organizations are part of the same national umbrella organization called the Council for a Strong America, a nonpartisan, nonprofit group that advocates for workforce development programs. And both reports came out less than a week before Illinois lawmakers return from their spring break to begin the final stretch of the 2019 regular session.

Pritzker's budget proposal calls for a \$100 million increase in general revenue funding for early childhood education. That would be the largest single-year increase in state history and would boost total funding for those programs to just more than \$636 million.

That, however, is only one of many significant funding increases Pritzker is proposing, and all of his spending proposals rely on lawmakers approving a host of new taxes – including taxes on plastic shopping bags; higher tobacco taxes; and new taxes on sports wagering and legalized marijuana, to name a few – as well as other budget maneuvers that include reducing or delaying scheduled payments into state-funded pension systems.

Lawmakers will return to the Statehouse to begin the final stretch of the regular session on Tuesday.

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