

Illinois can do better on pre-K education

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If Dad brings home a pony on Monday, I'd say when the boys were small, and another pony on Tuesday, by Wednesday his kids will meet him at the door shouting "Where's the pony?"

That was meant to illustrate how expectations of children ramp up to meet whatever is done for them, my sympathies automatically siding with fellow beleaguered parents.

But there's a harder truth behind that: Children want so much because they need so much. Maybe not ponies, though some reader will no doubt argue that one. But they definitely need food and clothing and shelter and attention and love and vaccinations and storybooks and bedtime kisses and early morning activities and drinks of water in between.

They'll take as much as they can get, then put it to good use. They're sponges, soaking up whatever is poured over them, squirreling it away to fuel their astounding metamorphosis, the magic trick of transforming from squealing, pooping, nonverbal, immobile, lumps of flesh slightly bigger than a meatloaf into fully formed, functioning, aware and decent adults.

If all goes right. But what if it doesn't? What if young children don't get all the stuff they need? We see the results every day. Bad childhoods lead to bad adults, often, which help create the bad situations we must cope with on personal, family, neighborhood, city, county, state, national and world levels.

Gov. J.B. Pritzker knows this and is expected to push early childhood education in his State of the State address Wednesday.

Here's where I come in. Because people are notoriously callous toward children, sometimes even their own children, J.B. could use a warm-up act, the way an obscure comedian is pushed onstage before a sitcom taping to get the audience laughing. Because I know you, some of you anyway, crossing your arms, sitting back in your chairs, faces set in that Mid-American scowl of skepticism Grant Wood so deftly captured in "American Gothic."

"Why should I pay taxes for someone else's kid?" you snarl. "I don't have any kids." Or: "My kids are grown and did fine without any intercession from the state, no, just the hard work of myself and my wife and the grace of a benevolent God."

First, because it's the right thing to do. That argument gets shrugged off — doing what is right has fallen from favor, especially since Newt Gingrich discovered you could blithely do evil, provided you come up with an attractive phrase to describe your sin and then stick with it.

So I'll move to the second reason: Because it's necessary. Because not every parent is there in the trenches, answering their 3-year-old's endless questions. Some parents have three jobs. Or a drug addiction. They are dead, or in prison, or dumb, or callous, or busy doing less important things. Yet their kids will still become adults, the adults you'll be counting on to show at your house someday as plumbers and deliverymen and home health care workers, and not as meth addicts rifling your dresser drawers for jewelry. Money spent on children before kindergarten is a cut-rate way to improve society, as Barack Obama noted in 2015:

“Every dollar we put into high-quality early childhood education we get \$7 back in reduced teen pregnancy, improved graduation rates, improved performance in school, reduced incarceration rates. The society as a whole does better.”

(It's almost jarring, now, to see a president speak in complete sentences about a topic other than himself. Though it used to be quite common.)

Speaking of facts: So how many kids in Illinois under age 4 participate in state-run programs? Take a guess: 60%? 70%? Try 25%. Perhaps coincidentally, only one in four Illinois children is ready for kindergarten.

That's bad and getting worse. Illinois education has lost ground in the past decade. A 2018 CATO Institute ranking weighing the challenges facing students entering the system — considering levels of poverty and language skills — ranked Illinois 40th.

Funny. If one of our pro sports teams wins a championship, a million people dance in the streets, howling about how we're the best. Celebrating something they actually had no hand in doing. Educating our children is far more important and an area where we all can help, if only by paying taxes. To be champions, we must work at improving our game.