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If the Illinois General Assembly needs another reason to expand voluntary pre-kindergarten for all three- and four-year-olds, here it is: it helps fight crime. As the President of the Chicago Fraternal Order of Police, with 17,500 law enforcement members, and after decades on the front lines in the fight against crime, I know there is no substitute for tough law enforcement. Dangerous criminals must be prosecuted and locked up. But my years of experience have also taught me an important lesson. By giving children the right start in life, through programs such as high quality pre-kindergarten, we help them become responsible citizens instead of future violent criminals.

You may wonder how quality pre-kindergarten cuts crime. The answer is simple. Pre-kindergarten helps kids learn to listen, be attentive, and play well with others. These are the building blocks that prepare kids to succeed in school and later in life. That's why the *Preschool for All* proposal is so important. I know from the research that pre-kindergarten cuts crime.

We have been able to see the results in our own state. A study of the Chicago Child-Parent Centers found children who were not in the program were 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime by age 18. The landmark study of the High/Scope Perry Preschool in Ypsilanti, Mich. found at-risk 3- and 4-year-olds who were left out of the preschool program were five times more likely to grow up to be criminals by age 27 than at-risk kids in the program.

In addition to preventing crime, pre-kindergarten improves the reading and math skills crucial to many Illinois children. In our state, 38 percent of fourth-graders scored below the basic reading level, and 26 percent scored below the basic math level, according to the Nation's Report Card prepared by the U.S. Department of Education. A recent study found that students who attended a public pre-kindergarten program scored higher in reading tests than similar students who did not attend pre-kindergarten.

Pre-kindergarten produces many other benefits for our communities. The students enrolled in the Perry Preschool Program were far more likely to complete high school, hold a job, have higher earnings and own their homes than similar children who were denied high quality pre-kindergarten.

Illinois has taken steps in the right direction. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research's annual assessment of state pre-kindergarten programs, our state ranks very high among states in quality standards for early care and education programs. And our increased funding for pre-kindergarten over the past three years has reached an additional 25,000 at-risk three- and four-year-olds.

Yet, even with that wise investment, the unmet need in Illinois is enormous. The families of two out of three 3- and 4-year-olds receive no financial support to attend quality pre-kindergarten. Many of those children will continue to be denied the benefits of pre-kindergarten because for many parents the cost of high quality programs is beyond reach. Tuition for a year at a pre-kindergarten program in Illinois can run as high as \$6,000, which is about as high as the annual tuition at some of our public universities.

Preschool teachers or government will never replace mothers and fathers acting in the best interest of their kids. This is why participation in preschool is voluntary and why as a society we all must realize that many families need a helping hand in guiding them to ensure their kids get the right start.

Law enforcement is working hard every day to keep our communities safe. We need every weapon we can in the fight against crime. Preschool is penny wise and pound smart in reducing crime and saving money. The balance sheet ends up in our favor. Support for *Preschool for All* is a vote for a better, safer Illinois.

Mark Donahue is the President of the Chicago Fraternal Order of Police. He is a member of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Illinois, a bipartisan, non-profit, anti-crime organization of more than 190 police chiefs, sheriffs, state's attorneys, other law enforcement leaders, and violence survivors. Mr. Donahue also serves on the Early Learning Council by appointment of Governor Blagojevich. For more information, visit www.fightcrime.org/il.