

KIDS COUNT SYMPOSIUM  
VOICES FOR ILLINOIS CHILDREN  
MARCH 28, 2008  
CHICAGO

I AM HONORED AND EXCITED TO BE ADDRESSING THIS SYMPOSIUM.

VOICES FOR ILLINOIS CHILDREN, UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF JERRY STERMER, IS A MARVELOUS ORGANIZATION.

IT HAS MADE A MONUMENTAL DIFFERENCE IN THE LIVES OF MILLIONS OF OUR MOST IMPORTANT PEOPLE ... OUR CHILDREN.

IT HAS EVERY REASON TO JOIN IN CELEBRATING SUCCESSES IN OUR STATE.

EXPANDED HEALTH CARE.

EXPONENTIALLY GREATER PRE-SCHOOL ENROLLMENT.

LOWER TEEN BIRTH RATES.

VASTLY IMPROVED AND BROADENED PRENATAL CARE.

IMPLEMENTATION OF WELFARE REFORM THROUGH A POTENT BLEND OF PRAGMATISM AND HUMANITY THAT HELPED MOVE THOUSANDS OF OUR FELLOW ILLINOISANS FROM DEPENDENCE TO SELF-RELIANCE.

THOSE AND OTHER SUCCESSES ARE WORTH CELEBRATING AND WE SHOULD DO SO.

BUT YOUR ORGANIZATION IS NOT RESTING ON THOSE SUCCESSES. IT IS BUILDING ON THEM. AND, AS YOU KNOW, THERE IS MUCH TO BE DONE.

THE CHALLENGES ARE MANY.

WE MUST EDUCATE, ASSIMILATE AND NURTURE THE YOUNGEST OF OUR BURGEONING HISPANIC POPULATION.

WE MUST CLOSE THE UNACCEPTABLE, INTOLERABLE AND IMMORAL ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT GAP THAT CHEATS FAR TOO MANY AFRICAN AMERICAN AND HISPANIC KIDS OF REACHING THEIR FULL POTENTIAL.

WE MUST GUARANTEE ADEQUATE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES FOR ALL ELEMENTARY AND HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN ILLINOIS, REGARDLESS OF WHERE THEY LIVE.

WE MUST MAKE SURE HIGHER EDUCATION AND POST-SECONDARY JOB TRAINING PROGRAMS ARE AFFORDABLE.

WE MUST MAKE QUALITY HEALTH CARE BOTH AFFORDABLE AND ACCESSIBLE TO KIDS IN RURAL AND INNER CITY COMMUNITIES.

WE MUST EMPOWER CHILDREN TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE AS THEY GROW UP BY TEACHING THEM THE FUNDAMENTALS OF GOVERNMENT AND THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF CITIZENSHIP.

AND TO PROVIDE THE NECESSARY RESOURCES TO MEET THE CHALLENGES, WE MUST – WE MUST – REFORM AND RECHARGE ILLINOIS’ TAX STRUCTURE.

THE REVENUE GRID TODAY ESSENTIALLY REFLECTS THE ILLINOIS ECONOMY OF THE LATE 1960s, WHEN THE TAX SYSTEM WAS OVERHAULED. IT DOES NOT MIRROR THE ECONOMY OF 2008 AND IT IS INCAPABLE OF PRODUCING SUFFICIENT RESOURCES TO MEET THE COMMITMENTS WE HAVE MADE AND THE OBLIGATIONS WE HAVE AMASSED.

MEMBERS OF THE COMMERCIAL CLUB OF CHICAGO AND OTHER BUSINESS LEADERS HAVE ACKNOWLEDGED THIS AND CALLED FOR TAX INCREASES – NOT BECAUSE THEY LOVE PAYING THEM BUT BECAUSE THEY KNOW WE NEED THEM.

SHAME ON US IF WE CONTINUE FINANCING PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN BY PLANTING FISCAL TIME BOMBS THAT WILL EXPLODE WHEN THEY ARE TAXPAYERS. WE OUGHT TO BE ENHANCING THEIR FUTURE WITHOUT MORTGAGING IT.

LEADERS IN BOTH OF OUR MAJOR POLITICAL PARTIES NEED TO STEP UP. WE NEED TO DEMAND MORE RESPONSIBILITY. WE ALSO NEED TO STOP REWARDING IRRESPONSIBILITY.

I KNOW IT IS DIFFICULT TO CRITICIZE EXPANSION OF HEALTH CARE OR MORE FUNDING FOR EDUCATION EVEN IF WE KNOW THE DOLLARS TO SUPPORT THE GROWTH ARE REALLY NOT THERE.

WILL I TURN DOWN FEDERAL AND STATE GRANTS TO THE PAUL SIMON PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE BECAUSE THEY ARE FUNDED BY TOMORROW'S DOLLARS AND NOT TODAY'S?

BUT LET'S NOT FOOL OURSELVES: POLITICAL LEADERS TEND TO HEAR THE APPLAUSE AND TUNE OUT THE ADMONITIONS. DESPITE WHAT BING CROSBY ADVISED US WHILE CROONING AN UPBEAT STANDARD, WE NEED TO ACCENTUATE THE NEGATIVE – AND DE-EMPHASIZE THE POSITIVE UNTIL WE PULL OURSELVES OUT OF THIS FISCAL QUAGMIRE

WE CAN'T ALLOW THE STATE TO CONTINUE SPENDING BEYOND ITS MEANS. AND WE HAVE REACHED A POINT WHERE WE NEED TO FOCUS ON THE MEANS.

OVER THE LAST SEVERAL YEARS, WE HAVE BORROWED BILLIONS, RENEGED ON PENSION OBLIGATIONS, EMPLOYED ONE-TIME REVENUES TO SUPPORT ONGOING EXPENDITURES – MUCH OF IT IN THE NAME OF EXPANDING HEALTH CARE AND BOLSTERING EDUCATION.

WE SAY WE WANT STRAIGHT TALK AND FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY. WE SAY WE WANT A BETTER LIFE FOR EACH SUCCEEDING GENERATION AND WE DON'T WANT TO SADDLE THEM WITH UNDUE FINANCIAL BURDENS.

BUT DO WE REALLY? DO WE WARM TO THOSE WHO DEMAND SOME SACRIFICE FROM US OR THOSE WHO CHAMPION GAIN WITHOUT PAIN SOLUTIONS?

IF CANDIDATES AND PUBLIC OFFICIALS PROMISE NO TAX INCREASES UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES, THEY OUGHT TO BE FORCED TO DETAIL HOW THEY WILL BALANCE A BUDGET WITHOUT SADDLING TOMORROW'S GENERATIONS WITH TODAY'S OBLIGATIONS.

IF THEY PROMISE HUGE AMOUNTS OF ADDITIONAL SPENDING, WE MUST ASK THEM: WHERE WILL THE MONEY COME FROM? WHAT TAXES WILL YOU RAISE? WHAT OTHER SPENDING – SPECIFICALLY – WOULD YOU ELIMINATE OR DRASTICALLY REDUCE? WILL YOU HAVE THE DISCIPLINE TO ESCHEW POPULAR BUT UNDER-FUNDED NEW PROGRAMS AND TO JUNK EXISTING PROGRAMS THAT ARE INEFFECTIVE.

THE STATE OF ILLINOIS HAS A GARGANTUAN, STRUCTURAL DEFICIT. BUT WHERE IS THE LEADERSHIP AT THIS CRITICAL JUNCTURE, THE MOST CRITICAL SINCE A COURAGEOUS GOVERNOR AND ENOUGH GUTSY LEGISLATORS ENACTED THE INCOME TAX FOUR DECADES AGO?

COURAGE AND GUTS ARE IN SHORT SUPPLY. THERE ARE SURPLUSES OF PANDERING AND POSTURING.

RESPONSIBLE PUBLIC POLICY IS BLOCKED BY IRRESPONSIBLE CAMPAIGN PLEDGES NOT TO RAISE TAXES AND PARANOIA ABOUT THE NEXT ELECTION – NOT TO MENTION A FUNDAMENTAL BREAKDOWN IN TRUST AMONG OUR LEADERS – THE KIND OF TRUST PIVOTAL TO GOOD-FAITH NEGOTIATING AND PROGRESS.

AND WHERE, IN ALL OF THIS, IS THE CITIZENRY THAT GETS AS OUTRAGED OVER THE DISSERVICE TO FUTURE GENERATIONS AS IT HAS GOTTEN OVER SOARING UTILITY BILLS AND LEGISLATIVE PAY RAISES?

CLEARLY, WE NEED EAGLES INSTEAD OF OSTRICHES AT THE APEX OF STATE GOVERNMENT IN THE LEGISLATIVE AND THE EXECUTIVE BRANCHES.

ILLINOIS WILL NOT BE ABLE TO SOAR ECONOMICALLY WITH FLIGHTLESS BIRDS WHO IGNORE REALITY AND APPEAL TO OUR SELF-INTEREST.

WE CANNOT FIELD THE SKILLED WORKFORCE WE NEED TO ATTRACT HIGH-PAYING EMPLOYERS AND KEEP THEM HERE WITHOUT ADEQUATELY AND FAIRLY FUNDING EDUCATION.

WE CANNOT DEVELOP THAT WORKFORCE WITHOUT SQUARELY ADDRESSING – IN THE SCHOOLS AND IN THE NEIGHBORHOODS – THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT GAPS BETWEEN WHITE AND MINORITIES.

MONEY IS NOT THE ONLY ANSWER.

WE NEED TO STREAMLINE THE ADMINISTRATION OF EDUCATION. WE HAVE TOO MANY SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN THE STATE, INCLUDING 17 IN A COUNTY OF 40,000 AND SIX IN A COUNTY OF 12,000.

WE NEED TO DO A BETTER JOB OF MENTORING NEW TEACHERS AND EVALUATING ALL TEACHERS.

WE NEED TO DISCONTINUE OR RETOOL SOCIAL SERVICE PROGRAMS AND OTHER GOVERNMENT ENTERPRISES THAT ARE NOT WORKING.

BUT MONEY IS CERTAINLY A BIG PART OF THE ANSWER.  
AND VASTLY EXPANDED GAMING, FOR A LOT OF REASONS,  
SHOULD NOT BE THE CORE OF THE SOLUTION.

WE NEED TO RAISE INCOME TAXES AND CURB OUR RELIANCE  
ON PROPERTY TAXES.

WE NEED TO SERIOUSLY CONSIDER TAXING SERVICES – A  
GROWING SECTOR OF OUR ECONOMY.

WE NEED TO RE-EVALUATE WHAT WE CONSIDER FOOD AND  
DRUGS FOR PURPOSES OF THE SALES TAX EXEMPTION.

ILLINOIS IS ONE OF ONLY A FEW STATES THAT DOES NOT TAX  
RETIREMENT BENEFITS AND WE COULD REAP HUNDREDS OF  
MILLIONS WHILE LIMITING THE TAX TO RETIREES WHO EARN AT  
LEAST \$75,000 ABOVE AND BEYOND THE SOCIAL SECURITY THEY  
RECEIVE.

AS YOU CAN SEE, I'M ALMOST THERE. BUT I WOULD GLADLY  
PAY MY SHARE IF I'M THAT WELL OFF.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER IS THIS: WE SIMPLY CAN'T  
ALLOW THE STATE TO CONTINUE SPENDING MONEY IT DOES NOT  
HAVE – EVEN IF THE ADDITIONAL SPENDING ADDRESSES MAJOR  
NEEDS.

ULTIMATELY, THE DAY OF RECKONING WILL COME. THEN OUR KIDS AND GRANDKIDS WILL BE PAYING EVEN A LARGER TAB THAN WE ALREADY HAVE SENT THEM AND VITAL PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN WILL BE AT RISK.

SOME 44 YEARS AGO, AS A YOUNG JOURNALIST, I BEGAN MY CLOSE OBSERVATION OF ILLINOIS GOVERNMENT.

I'VE SEEN ENOUGH TO BE CYNICAL. I'VE SEEN ENOUGH FAKERY, ENOUGH IRRESPONSIBLE, CORRUPT PUBLIC OFFICIALS TO UNDERSTAND CITIZEN DISTRUST OF POLITICIANS. I'VE ALSO SEEN ENOUGH OF UNINFORMED, NARROW-MINDED, SACRIFICE-RESISTANT CITIZENS TO UNDERSTAND WHY MANY POLITICIANS DISTRUST AND DISDAIN THE PUBLIC AS MUCH AS THE PUBLIC DISTRUSTS AND DISDAINS POLITICIANS.

BUT I'M NOT A CYNIC. I'VE SEEN PUBLIC OFFICIALS STEP UP TO MAJOR CHALLENGES, AND I'VE SEEN ACTIVE CITIZENS PREVAIL IN GOOD CAUSES.

IT TAKES POLITICAL COURAGE. IT TAKES CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT. IT TAKES ORGANIZATIONS LIKE VOICES FOR ILLINOIS CHILDREN TO PROD OUR PUBLIC OFFICIALS INTO DOING THE RIGHT THING.

IT TAKES EXTRAORDINARY EFFORT AND COMMITMENT, PERHAPS EVEN MORE EFFORT AND EVEN MORE COMMITMENT THAN

AN EXEMPLARY ORGANIZATION LIKE VOICES HAS DISPLAYED FOR  
DECADES.

BUT OUR CHILDREN – WHO PERSONIFY THE FUTURE OF  
ILLINOIS – DESERVE NO LESS.