



The Hon. JB Pritzker

Moving Illinois in the Right Direction

An Interview with The Honorable JB Pritzker, Governor of Illinois

EDITORS' NOTE Governor JB Pritzker was sworn in as the 43rd governor of the State of Illinois on January 14, 2019. During his first session, the governor passed a balanced budget with a bipartisan majority, making historic investments in education and human services, while restoring fiscal stability to Illinois. The governor also won bipartisan passage for legalization of adult-use recreational cannabis and for Rebuild Illinois, the largest investment in state history to upgrade roads, bridges, rail, broadband, and universities in every corner of the state. The governor enacted policies to support job creation, raised the minimum wage to a living wage, made college more affordable for nearly 10,000 additional students, and advanced equal pay for women. A national leader in early childhood education for over 20 years and having organized President Obama's White House Summit on Early Childhood Education, Governor Pritzker this year made childcare and preschool more affordable in Illinois for tens of thousands more families. He also partnered with the Greater Chicago Food Depository and Share our Strength to fight child poverty by expanding school breakfast programs in low income school districts across the state. Before becoming governor, Pritzker founded 1871, the non-profit

small business incubator in Chicago that has helped entrepreneurs create more than 11,000 jobs and more than 1,000 new companies. As governor, he has expanded support for new business incubators and cut taxes for hundreds of thousands of small businesses while incentivizing job creation and innovation. He also extended research and development tax credits to help manufacturing workers and businesses thrive, and he worked with the business community to create apprenticeship tax credits to promote job training. The descendant of refugees, Governor Pritzker believes the state and the nation should welcome and protect its immigrant families and that we must fight against the wave of intolerance that has risen in recent years. Before becoming governor, he led the creation of the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center. As governor, he has built the most diverse cabinet and governor's office in Illinois history.



In Springfield, Governor Pritzker signs legislation raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour with hundreds of workers on February 19, 2019. All in all, 1.4 million Illinoisans will get a raise.



Governor Pritzker signs a bipartisan balanced budget that begins to pay down debts from the prior administration, makes historic investments in education and secures innovative tax credits for apprenticeships, film production, and research and development.

When you took office, a priority for your administration was to bring fiscal responsibility and a balanced budget to Illinois. Will you discuss your efforts in this regard?

There are three things that it takes to balance the budget – managing your expenses, managing your revenues, and growing jobs in the economy. I have found that people often ignore the last one and think that job growth just happens by itself,

which it can at times, but it requires nurturing. We have been challenged from a social service perspective in Illinois because we went more than two years without a budget from 2015 through 2017. As a result, many of our social service agencies that deliver the basic services that the state pays for were independent organizations and closed shop. The result is that the services that those delivered were just gone for many families, and particularly for those most in need of the support that state government can offer.

When I came into office, I was facing not only a structural deficit of more than \$2 billion annually, but also a bill backlog of approximately \$15 billion which was all as a result of the two-year budget impasse. On top of that, we had a social service sector that was hollowed out and so the challenge was daunting. However, my belief is that if you provide the right support for families, provide great education, and nurture the job creation environment, that those three things together put more people to work and help grow the economy.

What efforts are being made to improve Illinois' education system?

In regard to education, everything about the education system I would describe as kind of an escalator that all of our children get onto.

You want them to be able to ride that escalator all the way through college, if possible, and maybe through graduate school. However, we have to keep that escalator working so it can continue to lift them up along the way. We've got to start them at the bottom at the very earliest moments, so we need to begin at birth and look at what happens between birth and when they show up at kindergarten.

I wrote a short book with the Bridgespan organization called *Achieving Kindergarten Readiness*. It is about much of what I have worked on around early childhood, which focuses on all of the pieces of what should happen for a child between birth and age five. This includes supporting parents because parents are the first and best teachers a child has.

This includes providing home visitation to support parents and children at the youngest ages. We need to support childcare which is a huge expense for many families. We want to make sure that parents have the ability to either get a break from their children or be able to go to work if they want to. We need to support them with childcare assistance, which I provided for in my budget. We expanded childcare assistance and eligibility for more than 10,000 additional children in Illinois.

We need to focus on preschool, which is a hugely important element of education that has often been overlooked but is now getting real attention. I think it gets the most attention out of all these early childhood areas because preschool looks the most like kindergarten so it's the easiest thing for policymakers to understand.

In all of those age zero to five areas, I have tried to move Illinois in the right direction. I happen to think that if you start children off well, and all the evidence supports this, if you nurture their brain development, most of which is occurring in those earliest years before they even show up at school, then they show up for kindergarten ready. If they show up for

kindergarten ready, it is the best way for a child to launch into the formal institutional education system and it also is the best way to save taxpayers money in the education system.

If kids show up for kindergarten ready, they're also much more likely to graduate from high school, to go to college, and to get a job.

Will you discuss your initiatives around job creation and providing the skills needed for the jobs of the future?

I don't know whether it shows up in my bio the way that it should, but my career has for the most part been in the technology sector. I recognize how important it is that we prepare our young people for a career in high-technology industries that require a high-level of skills. This is why I have shifted our workforce development dollars in the state to the fastest growing industries, so that jobs will be available in the future for those who are currently learning the skills necessary to do those jobs. I founded what is considered the world's best technology business incubator here in Chicago called 1871. I recognize how important it is to prepare people for the jobs of the future and to grow those jobs. We want Illinois to be a hub for innovation and the place for the jobs that will come with the evolution of our world economy.

How critical has infrastructure investment been for your administration?

Illinois is the supply chain hub of the nation. We have the best transportation infrastructure with almost every major railroad intersecting here in Illinois. We have a massive highway system which supports logistic opportunities. Our transportation logistics and distribution industry is a fast growing one which is why it is very important for us to invest in transportation infrastructure. That is why, after more than 10 years without an infrastructure investment bill in Illinois, we passed the largest infrastructure investment program in state history, a \$45 billion capital program. The federal government is not functioning the way that it should and



Governor Pritzker greets preschool students in Chicago on March 22, 2019. The FY20 state budget included the biggest investment ever in Illinois into early childhood programs and facilities.

isn't delivering infrastructure funding, but we just can't wait. We now have the dollars in our capital bill to match a federal program if it gets passed. In the meantime, we have to upgrade our roads and bridges, our rail infrastructure, mass transit, and waterways. We just have too much to do in our state to let it continue to crumble.

How valuable is your business experience and expertise in your role as governor?

I would first say that you can't run government like a business. However, many of the skills that one learns running businesses are useful in government. For example, the ability to negotiate and to understand what the other side of a negotiation wants and needs. Another thing you learn in business is that talent matters. The quality of the talent that you bring into your business is often determinative of whether your business will be successful. I have really taken that to heart in the hiring for my administration.

Your administration has made great strides in addressing the needs of Illinois since you assumed office. Are you able to enjoy the process and celebrate the wins?

Yes, briefly. I think that's the right way to say it. I'm proud of what we have achieved and I do stop and smell the roses briefly, but we still have so much to do. We have so much to accomplish ahead of us. We have to keep this ship turning in the right direction and then moving it forward in the right direction.

I would tell your readers, who are business leaders, that Illinois is open for business. We have the best, most talented, dedicated workforce in the nation. We have an advantageous corporate tax system. We have a business-friendly environment that is only improving, and we are stabilizing our state's fiscal situation so that we'll be able to attract even more businesses and jobs to the state going forward. ●



In front of the I-80 bridge in Joliet that will be completely rebuilt by 2025, Governor Pritzker celebrates the \$45 billion Rebuild Illinois capital plan, the largest infrastructure investment in Illinois history which will create hundreds of thousands of jobs.