

J.B. Pritzker, Managing Partner, The Pritzker Group

J.B. (Jay Robert) Pritzker is applying all of his business and political savvy, skills and contacts, honed while building technology businesses and on Capitol Hill, to early childhood, because he views it as the most powerful way to change the world. He says, “Early childhood is not a ‘niche’ issue. From a public policy perspective, whether you care about jobs, education, health care, budgets or any other big-ticket issue, you should start with very young children.”

In the late 1990s, Pritzker founded New World Ventures, now a leading venture capital firm, and co-founded The Pritzker Group, a private investment firm. He has also served on the legislative staff of two U.S. Senators and one U.S. Representative, and he ran for Congress in 1998. Therefore, he understands the political process from many angles.

When he and his wife created their foundation almost a decade ago, Pritzker met with a variety of experts to gain a deeper understanding of his areas of interest. Among their advisors were two leading early childhood experts who, like Pritzker, were based in Chicago: businessman and philanthropist Irving Harris and professor and author Barbara Bowman. Pritzker was captivated by the research on the impact of early childhood across their many areas of interest and decided that their philanthropy would focus on promoting a better early start for America’s children. He then sought out economist and Nobel Laureate James Heckman from the University of Chicago to learn more; he says, “I found that the economic argument was most compelling. I believe strongly in fiscal responsibility. I want good social policy done within the confines of the revenue that governments can raise. It was blindingly obvious that the most efficient, fiscally responsible way to spend money is on young children. It’s also the most rewarding.”

After launching the foundation, Pritzker worked with Prof. Heckman to create the Pritzker Consortium on Early Childhood Development at the University of Chicago, and he is a co-founder (with the Bill and Melinda Gates, George Kaiser and Irving Harris Foundations and the Buffett Early Childhood Fund) of the First Five Years Fund, which advocates for federal policy change for children prenatal to age five.

From the beginning, the Pritzker Family Foundation addressed research, services *and* policy. As Pritzker put it, “I needed to be a catalyst, to effect more change than was possible from just investing financial resources. No foundation – not Pritzker, not Pew – has enough money to make a big enough difference funding only direct services. We can be effective at shining a spotlight, but can’t fund prenatal care or preschools to any significant degree. So we have to change public policy.”

He immediately jumped into the policy fray – first talking to state policymakers in Illinois, then their Congressional delegation. Now that he has become a prominent business champion nationally, he is often called on to talk to leaders in other states. He says, “I talk to state policymakers all the time. I had breakfast this morning with the Governor and talked about early childhood – he thinks of me as ‘the early childhood guy’.” Pritzker has used all of his networks and experience to promote early childhood and says, “Politicians have to think about votes and money, and at-risk children and their parents don’t represent either of those. When politicians are about to allocate dollars and thinking ‘who will be happy and who will be angry with me,’ it’s easy to drop off funding for children because they don’t feel repercussions. But I remind them, ‘This is about your legacy. When you leave office and history is being written, you want them to say you made a lasting difference and changed this state or this country for the better. Young people will grow up and get an education and have jobs and health care and better lives because of you.’”

Pritzker has worked on several key policy victories in Illinois over the past several years, such as the state’s historic commitment to significantly increase funding for at-risk three- and four-year-olds in 2006 as well as blocking massive cuts to early childhood programs in the state’s budget battles in 2009.

He has two key pieces of advice for early childhood advocates. One is to bring the business community into the fight. “Some early childhood experts are like the scientists in the laboratory – brilliant and amazing at figuring out what works for children and what doesn’t. The problem is the scientist isn’t always the best person to promote the evidence to funders and policymakers. I see my job as helping to cross that chasm. I think we are still talking about the subject matter in mostly psychological or emotional terms. We’re not going to attract the money or certain groups of politicians until we break out of that mold. You can’t just show a young child and tell a heart-wrenching story. Sometimes, especially now, we have to start with the dollars and cents and the scientific facts about the brain research and the hard impacts on the child. There’s also a patriotic element to this – in a global economy and a fight for international leadership, this will make our country strong. The message needs to move out of where it used to be; it needs to be ‘the facts are the facts, now what are you going to do about it’.”

The second key piece of advice is to reach policymakers early in their careers: “If you want to move the ball from a political perspective, you have to connect with and advocate for candidates before they become elected or move too far up the political ladder. The advantage is that these candidates probably don’t know anything about the science or economics of early childhood development, so if you can get an audience with them, you may be the first one telling them about this topic. They may also grab onto it as a way to distinguish themselves from other candidates. I talked to one local politician who subsequently became a big early childhood advocate - and now he’s running for Congress.”