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Invest in a 21st century work force

Placing more emphasis and resources on preschool and early child care would do wonders.

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— America faces economic perils unseen for decades. Action is needed now to get this economy on the right track.

Our elected representatives in Washington are currently considering legislation intended to create jobs immediately, provide short-term relief to families and promote long-term economic growth.

The inclusion of additional funding for early childhood education and care will help accomplish all three of these goals.

As a country, we have rarely viewed early childhood development as a strategy for economic growth. But investments in high-quality early education and care are among the most cost-effective and powerful sources of economic stimulus available.

First of all, new federal support for early education and child care programs will spur immediate job growth in Maine.

Much of early care and education spending goes directly to wages. At least 75 percent of Head Start funding, for example, is spent on staff compensation.

The increased investment in early childhood programs will allow providers to hire more staff immediately. Their wages will be spent at local businesses, multiplying the short-term benefit to the economy.

EMPLOYMENT IS SIGNIFICANT

To give an idea of the potential for job growth, consider the fact that preschool and child care programs employ 30 percent more people in Maine than the logging and forestry industry. Child care work is also one of the fastest growing types of employment in Maine.

Preschool and child care services are in constant demand, since most working families require day care. The percentage of families with two working parents and children under 6 years old in Maine rose from around 44 percent in 1980 to almost 60 percent in 1990. By the year 2010, it is estimated that 85 percent of the national labor force will consist of parents.

Expanding federal support for quality early education and child care programs will bring immediate short-term relief to working families in Maine. Many families struggle to meet the cost of day care or preschool tuition, which today costs more than a year's tuition at the University of Maine.

Parents often have to choose between child care expenses and other critical household needs.

Affordable child care and preschool options will keep our economy moving and our workforce flexible, allowing parents to keep working or transition to a new job.

This new commitment to high-quality early education and care is also a critical investment in work force development and long-term economic growth.

Early education programs prepare children for the rigors of a good education and also help them develop the all-purpose skills necessary for personal, and later career, development.

The first years of our children's lives are a critical period when they develop the learning and social skills that serve as the foundation for a lifetime.

In a 40-year study of Michigan's Perry Preschool, researchers found that the at-risk children enrolled in the program were 44 percent more likely to graduate from high school, compared to those who did not attend.

Children who lack early learning experiences are more

likely to struggle academically and drop out of high school.

They are also more like to be arrested, become teen parents and abuse illegal drugs – all serious disqualifiers for managers looking to hire.

RESULTS ARE COST-EFFECTIVE

High-quality early education is also extremely cost-effective. The Perry study also showed that the program cut crime, welfare and other costs so much, it saved taxpayers \$16 for every dollar invested.

We are fortunate in Maine that Gov. Baldacci understands these issues and has created the Governor's Business Round Table on Early Childhood and made strong appointments to the new Maine Children's Growth Council.

With the governor's leadership, these groups are working to elevate high-quality early education and care as a higher public policy priority.

Sens. Susan Collins and Olympia Snowe have been longtime leaders on early childhood issues in Congress.

Last week, as members of key committees, they have supported economic recovery legislation that will add substantial federal funding for Head Start and Early Head Start and the Child Care and Development Block Grants. We thank Snowe and Collins for their understanding of these issues and their leadership.

The economic recovery plan is a critical opportunity to make new gains in providing early childhood education and care, giving families and business the relief they need. This is exactly the type of short-term boost and long-term investment that our economy needs now.

By expanding access to early care and education, we can give Maine's families the resources needed to keep this economy moving and our children the education required to become productive workers in the future.