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Early education investment touted to area businesses

By Seth Koenig, Times Record Staff

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BATH — Spending money now on early childhood education will pay big dividends down the road. That was the message Thursday during a lunchtime summit at the Kennebec Tavern, where two of the country's top researchers into the subject joined with state officials to address Mid-coast business leaders.

Dana Connors, president of the Maine State Chamber of Commerce, told those in attendance that the involvement of the business community in promoting early childhood education is crucial. The Kennebec Tavern event represented one of several such events in recent days as state officials and early childhood advocates took to the road for their cause.

"When the business community gets involved, it will draw considerable attention, just due to the fact that the business community is involved," said Connors, noting that childhood education is often viewed as a "social issue" and not a priority of businesses.

Hiro Yoshikawa, of the Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University, explained to the assembled crowd how early childhood interaction affects a growing child.

Building from research that suggests 85 percent of a child's brain development is complete by age 5, Yoshikawa said quality pre-kindergarten centers

can be useful in offering young children the "warm" adult interaction and toxic stress relief necessary to help kids develop into academic achievers.

"We need to intervene early in a child's life, but we also need to intervene early with the parents," he said, pointing to studies comparing children with educated and informed parents against those with less educated parents. "Research has found an enormous disparity by 36-months-old on the order of thousands and thousands of more words of vocabulary."

Rob Grunewald, an associate economist with the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, wrote one of the country's landmark reports on the financial benefits of investing in early childhood education. He told Thursday's attendees that spending on pre-kindergarten programs results in future public savings on special education, corrections and welfare, among other things.

When the math is worked out, Grunewald said, every dollar spent on early childhood education generates \$16 in benefits to the community.

"This is a rate of return that would not sit on the private market for very long," he said. "It would get invested."

"In Minnesota, when business leaders were introduced to the discussion, saying 'How can we realize this return on investment understanding the continuing constraints on public spending moving forward?' it was valuable in the development of public policy," Grunewald continued.

The economist said that, in addition to financial support and becoming visible "unlikely business spokesperson" for the cause, Minnesota business leaders rallied behind investment in early childhood education by offering flexible work schedules to accommodate child care, creating pre-tax accounts to help workers pay for child care and funding scholarships for pre-kindergarten students.

Connors and John Richardson, state commissioner of economic and community development, called for similar help here in Maine. Connors asked those in attendance to fill out cards at their tables indicating how they might be willing to get involved in the cause. Options listed on the cards included volunteering for early childhood advocacy organizations, sharing parenting information and resources with their employees, and adding the www.bornlearning.com link to their company's Web site, among other things.

"I'm not sure if (the benefits of early childhood education) are well understood by the business community," said Connors, "but when it is understood, it's a call to action."