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Early childhood investments make sense

By John Peters

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Our company has been providing heating and energy services to Mainers for more than 100 years. While I'm proud that Downeast Energy is celebrating its centennial, part of my job as a business manager is to plan for the next 100 years. That means positioning the company and its employees with the tools and talents that will be required in an ever-changing global economy. At the top of my list is our ability to attract, train and retain a high-quality workforce.

Maine workers possess a great work ethic. That hasn't changed in the last 100 years, and I hope it will always be a constant in this Yankee independent state for every future generation.

But hard work is no longer enough in many workplaces. Many businesses struggle to find workers with the knowledge, innovative thinking, self-awareness, self-discipline, and persistence needed to compete and succeed in today's workplace.

Retraining adult workers can be expensive, and not always guaranteed. We need to make sure that the next generation is educated and ready to roll up their sleeves and get to work. The best way to do that is to make sure tomorrow's workforce starts their training and development at the very beginning.

To benefit from the skills and effort of a worker at age 18 or 22, we need to give that worker a solid foundation, just as we would to a new house. That foundation starts when he or she is learning and developing in the first years of life.

I recently attended the Mid-Coast Business Leaders Summit on Early Childhood and saw some compelling evidence that will help all of us respond to this challenge in a proactive manner. At this conference, business leaders saw presentations from a brain science researcher at Harvard University and an economist from the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis.

Harvard professor Dr. Hiro Yoshikawa showed us the research on how 90 percent of all human brain development happens in the first three years of life. According to his research, young children's early development impacts their entire lives, including their contributions to society as adults.

I was struck by the fact that during this critical time, a person establishes the neurological connections that lay the foundation for all intellectual, emotional, social, moral and physical development. However, because these benefits are so far in the future our country has made these investments a low priority.

Rob Grunewald, an economist from the Federal Reserve Bank, presented research showing what this means to us as taxpayers. Investing \$1 in high quality early education programs results in future public savings of \$16 in special education, corrections and welfare costs.

Grunewald summed it up well: "This is a rate of return that would not sit on the private market for very long. It would get invested."

Failure to invest in high-quality early childhood programs has been costly for Maine. Currently, we spend more than \$300 million annually in special education costs and more than \$800 million annually in substance abuse costs as well as large criminal justice costs. Every teen who becomes a criminal and

stays in our criminal justice system as an adult costs Maine \$2.5 million over the course of that lifetime. For those concerned about Maine's economic success, this is clearly lost productivity.

Grunewald also told us how business leaders in Minnesota helped change the thinking and development of public policy in that state. In addition to becoming visible "unlikely spokespeople" for the cause, they 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. It's my hope that Maine's business community can step up to the plate, as well.

Policymakers and business leaders have not always viewed early childhood development as a strategy for economic growth or competitiveness. A new national organization, of which I am a member, America's Edge is seeking to change this. We believe that dollars invested in early childhood development will provide extraordinary returns for our state and our nation compared with most other types of investments.

For the continued success of Downeast Energy and every other business in Maine, high-quality early childhood programs are vital for our individual and statewide future economic security. It's time for more Maine businesses to weigh in and help our elected officials make early childhood investments a higher priority.

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