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MAINE COMPASS: Educare will serve children, community, future workforce

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Every Maine parent wants the brightest possible future for his or her child.

Every Maine business owner wants a prosperous future for his or her business, with bright, hard-working, conscientious and dedicated employees.

Maine's Educare Center in Waterville will help make these dreams come true. It will serve as a learning laboratory of the highest-quality early care and education for the rest of New England.

In addition, it is a model of community, state and philanthropic collaboration, led by Doris Buffett's vision that "education is absolutely number one."

High-quality early care and education, such as found in Educare, is vital for our individual and statewide future economic security. It provides tremendous short-term and long-term benefits.

Seventy percent of Maine's current workforce is made up of working parents; 46,000 working parents have children under the age of 5. If parents know their children are receiving the highest-quality care while they work, we will have higher employee morale, reduced absenteeism and increased productivity.

That translates into lower employee turnover and lower recruiting and training costs.

High-quality early education gives the children who participate in the programs the very best foundations at the time when 85 percent of human brain development takes place.

Educare provides high-quality early care and education to low-income, at-risk children and their families until the age of 5, narrowing the achievement gap many poor children experience into elementary school and beyond.

The Waterville Educare Center, a first in Maine and New England, will provide about 200 children the solid educational foundation that will help them perform better in school and the workforce.

The center will focus on quality, with a low child-to-teacher ratio, and will employ highly

qualified educators and child development professionals.

The Educare Center is adjacent to the George Mitchell Elementary School, where 64 percent of the 625 students receive free- or reduced-price lunches; 67 percent of the kindergarten students come from low-income families; 48 percent of recent kindergarteners scored below the norm on their school readiness assessment; and 48 percent of third-graders failed state reading standards and 34 percent failed state math standards.

Both Educare and the George Mitchell Elementary School are the feeder system for Waterville's public high school, which has one of Maine's highest dropout rates.

In 2006-07, the Waterville High School's graduation rate was 72 percent, compared to a state average of 81.6 percent.

Research shows that children who have high-quality early care and education are more likely to succeed academically and attend college, have higher wage earnings as adults, own their own homes, and contribute to Maine's tax base.

Conversely, research shows that those who lack high-quality early care and education are more likely to fall behind their peers and struggle throughout school.

Failure to invest in high-quality early care and education has been costly for Maine. Currently, the state spends more than \$300 million annually in increased special education costs and more than \$800 million annually in increased substance abuse costs. High-quality early education can reduce these costs.

What we are finally starting to understand is that we need to invest earlier in children's lives to ensure that every kid gets the right start.

No one pretends that educating 200 kids a year will, in itself, solve all of our problems.

But it will get those kids started on the right track to success and productive employment. Moreover, it will be a model of excellence for all Maine schools to show what can be accomplished as we try to give a literal head start to the next generation that is at risk of failure.

Educare will help Waterville's more vulnerable kids at the earliest possible age, improve and safeguard the community, and help our collective bottom line.

Dana Connors is president of the Maine Chamber of Commerce and member of America's Edge, a national non-profit organization established in 2007 to help engage leaders of the business community more extensively in support of local, state, and national efforts to improve the quality of public education.