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For business, no better investment than early learning

Jim Clair

As our federal leaders look for the best possible investments to jump-start our economy, I have a suggestion that may surprise some people: Consider early learning programs.

New research from the business leader group America's Edge shows investment in high-quality early learning is among the most effective ways to infuse millions of dollars into local and state economies, while creating new jobs in our communities and building a foundation for sustained economic security.

Business leaders from across Maine do the same thing I do every day -- look at our bottom lines and critically analyze how to generate the most return from every dollar invested, especially during the worst downturn in decades.

The America's Edge research confirms that, across the state, we can generate \$1.75 for every \$1 invested in quality early learning. That investment is as high, or higher, than investments in other major sectors, such as manufacturing, wholesale trade, retail trade, utilities and transportation.

This increased spending, in turn, creates jobs. Such a rate of return certainly elevates early care and education as an economic sector through which we can create real economic development for our state.

In addition, research shows that investment in early learning will save Maine businesses millions of dollars lost every year because of absenteeism related to employees' child care problems. On average, parents miss five to nine days of work every year to deal with child care arrangements. Not only will access to consistent, high-quality child care reduce the costs of absenteeism, it has also been proven to increase employee productivity -- again, a big boost to Maine businesses' bottom lines on both sides of the balance sheet.

Our state's businesses will also be better positioned to attract skilled, educated individuals when the economy begins to recover. Maine is certainly still struggling with an unemployment rate hovering just above 8 percent and a series of state budgets that cut hundreds of millions of dollars during the course of the past few years.

I am confident, however, that our economy will turn around, and, when it does, we need to be strategically poised to attract skilled individuals to our state. Just as we need a quality K-12 system in place to attract these workers and new businesses to our state, access to a quality early learning system is critical to families with young children who are deciding where to live.

A quality early care and education system will also ensure a future work force armed with the 21st century skills Maine businesses will need. Businesses certainly want their employees to have the hard skills -- math, reading and writing. Across the country, a lack of these skills is costing U.S. businesses in excess of \$3.7 billion every year for remedial education services for employees.

Just as important as hard skills, workers need the soft abilities -- the ability to be communicators, collaborators and critical thinkers. Even in these tough economic times, many employers have trouble finding workers with these critical capabilities.

In the years ahead, as baby boomers retire and the work force shrinks, we must ensure that we have a pipeline of well-educated workers with the knowledge, skills and abilities that are key to Maine businesses maintaining our competitive edge. High quality early prekindergarten education is key to meeting these challenges. Extensive research on early brain architecture in the critical time from birth to age 5 shows that consistent, high-quality early education programs are the answer to these challenges. In fact, the long-term return on investment is hard to match -- up to \$16 for every \$1 invested.

Early care and education offer something few sectors can provide as we analyze the best ways to utilize limited funds -- significant short- and long-term economic benefits across the state.

Sens. [Olympia Snowe](#) and [Susan Collins](#) have been true champions for increased investments in Head Start, Early Head Start and the Child Care Development Block Grant.

Having recently met with both of them to talk about these critical programs, I have every confidence they will continue to be congressional leaders for all our nation's, and especially Maine's, children. As a business leader, I wholeheartedly support their efforts to prioritize federal investments in early learning as a significant tool to revitalize Maine businesses and our state's economy.

Jim Clair is CEO of Goold Health Systems in Augusta and is a member of the Maine Children's Growth Council and America's Edge.