



## Early education benefits children, families and our economy

By Rep. Meredith Strang Burgess

Despite high unemployment, good jobs with good benefits are going unfilled in Maine because there are not enough skilled workers to fill them.

Recently a top official in one of Portland's larger employers said that his company paid for remedial math classes for new employees to bring them up to the needed skill level.

Earlier this year, America's Edge, a national business leader group, reported that only 24 percent of employers nationally consider new employees with four-year college degrees to have "excellent" basic knowledge and applied skills. Employers report that too many workers lack competency in written communications, professionalism and critical thinking.

Just like in Portland, businesses all across our country are spending resources – to the tune of \$3.7 billion annually – on remedial education for their employees. Even more alarming is the \$319 billion lost every year in wages, taxes and productivity caused by too many unskilled workers in this country.

What can Maine do to reverse this disturbing trend? Perhaps the answer is found not solely in the resources we spend on higher education and training, but rather the lack of resources spent during the first three-to-five years of life when 85 percent of our brains are developed.

As a member of Maine Children's Growth Council I have learned a lot in the last two years about early brain development and what it means not only for our children, but for our publicly supported educational system, our corrections system and our future economic development.

Today scientists know so much more about what happens in the human brain through age five than was known 10 or 15 years ago. Brain architecture and developing skills are built from the bottom up just like the foundation for a house. The process begins before birth and continues into adulthood.

Just as in a house, the brain starts with a foundation and then adds frames and neurological wiring in a predictable sequence. Simple brain circuits and skills provide the scaffolding for more advanced circuits and skills over time. Early experiences literally shape how the brain gets built and opens the pathways to all social, cognitive and emotional future learning. A strong foundation in the early years increases the probability

of positive outcomes. A weak foundation increases the odds of later difficulties.

Yet during the time when a person establishes the neurological connections that lay the foundation for all intellectual, emotional, social, moral and physical development, we, as a society, invest the fewest resources. In fact, when compared to every dollar spent on school-aged children, Maine invests less than nine cents on our youngest children.

Early care and education programs are critical to building healthy brain development in Maine babies and toddlers. Rigorously researched studies show that young children who experience high-quality early care and education have greater speech and language skills, and are more likely to succeed academically in school, to attend college, have higher earnings as adults, own their own homes, and thus contribute to Maine's tax base.

Students who experience high-quality early care and education are less likely to experience emotional and mental health problems, require remedial education, drop out of school, become teen parents, engage in criminal behavior as teens and adults, abuse drugs or become dependent on welfare.

Failure to invest in high-quality early care and education has been costly for Maine. Currently, we annually spend more than \$300 million in increased special education costs and \$800 million in increased substance abuse costs.

Consider also that, in 1996, the U.S. Departments of Justice and Health and Human Services estimated that domestic violence and sexual assault costs our nation \$260 billion per year. Apportioning these costs on a per capita basis yields a total cost of \$1.2 billion for our state. In today's economy, the cost would be more than \$1.5 billion. While this may seem high, consider the costs of special education, mental health services, child protection services, law enforcement services, judicial and corrections costs, and the costs to employers for lost productivity. Further, keeping one teen out of a lifetime in prison saves taxpayers \$2.5 million.

Given all of these facts, I would argue that a wiser and more cost-effective answer is to invest more resources early and reduce these later but exponentially larger costs. It also makes better business sense.

Today, 70 percent of parents with children under five are in Maine's workforce. That makes high-quality early care and education good for Maine business. If parents know their children are receiving high-quality care while they work, employees have higher morale, absenteeism is reduced, productivity increases and turnover decreases.

And by providing quality care and education when our children are developing those critical learning platforms for later in life, we are making a wise investment in those who will become our future workforce and leaders. Maine is a small state growing older by the day. We simply do not have a single potential worker to waste. High-quality early care and education is a smart investment for our future and is for critical our state's long-term economic security.