

THE NEWS TRIBUNE

Scoop du jour: Let's invest in early childhood education

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Published: 11/09/10 3:50 pm

PROFESSIONAL educators have realized in recent years what many parents have instinctively always known: children begin the process of learning on the day they are born. They learn how to say they're hungry or have a wet diaper. They learn to crawl, to talk, to walk, to use the Big People's potty.

Research has discovered that those first years of life, from birth to 5, are not just a period of amazing human growth and a lot of sleepless nights. It also is the time that children learn how to learn.

We now know that those first years determine a child's later success in school and, perhaps, their life. Early childhood education sets the foundation for preparing young people to enter school ready to learn and equipped to excel.

These revelations have brought together business leaders from throughout the country, throughout Washington State, and even throughout the Gig Harbor area.

Why? Because research by America's Edge confirms that, for every \$1 invested into early childhood learning opportunities, the economy gets a \$16 return due to reduced crime, welfare and special education costs.

America's Edge research shows early investments in high-quality early childhood education programs have real short-term economic benefits and a long-term return unmatched by any other program.

Unskilled workers cost the United States \$319 billion annually in lost wages, productivity and taxes. Businesses spend \$3.7 billion each year teaching basic skills to employees.

Yet if we just provided high-quality preschools for our state's 4-year-olds, we could save public schools 10 percent of the special education budget, about \$120 million a year.

Unfortunately, our public policy has not caught up with educational understanding. Less than 4 percent of public investment in education and development is directed at our youngest students. It's clear that, unless we focus on those years of birth to 5, we can expect a widening between the skills our businesses need and the skills our young people have when they enter the workforce.

That's why business leaders nationwide are

getting onboard with America's Edge. By helping change the way policymakers and the public look at funding for early learning, it ultimately will strengthen American businesses and our communities.

If the answer is increased funding for early childhood education programs in our state, it seems unlikely we'll make much progress this year. With at least a \$4.5 billion budget deficit to fix, the state Legislature will be in a cutting, not spending, mood when it convenes in January.

That doesn't bode well for reducing the costs associated with remedial education down the line, which is costly and hard on kids, schools and families.

But the Legislature can help without spending money. It can raise the bar for certifications of teachers in preschools and daycares and set higher standards. It can just maintain the state's investment in the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program, which is Washington's high-quality preschool for low-income children.

Those children coming from the poorest families are the most vulnerable.

Research shows that 75 percent of them go to kindergarten unprepared. Yet ECEAP, run by local organizations, has waiting lists up to

more than 200 percent of capacity.

Now that we know unequivocally that the process of education begins when life begins, we can't ignore our responsibility to early learning. Kids who get that head start have greater success in school, lower dropout rates, earn more and contribute more as adults.

It's what happens before children come to school that counts.