



**Think small to build economy: Supporting early learning programs will help attract investments while strengthening state's work force**

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**By Jim Parker**

The unemployment rate in Montana is still too high at 7.4 percent but our state is certainly weathering the recession better than most of the country.

As we look to better days, we must find strategic ways to strengthen our businesses, create a foundation for long-term economic security, and create a pipeline with the 21st century skills our businesses need to compete in a global marketplace.

I have a suggestion: Think small. Consider improving and expanding early learning programs for our youngest children.

New research from the business leader group America's Edge shows that investments in high-quality early learning are among the most effective ways to infuse billions of dollars into local and state economies, while creating thousands of jobs and building a foundation for

sustained economic security.

Business leaders across Montana look at their bottom lines every day and critically analyze how to generate the most return from every dollar invested, especially during the worst economic downturn in decades. The America's Edge research confirms that, across the state, we can generate \$1.65 for every \$1 invested in quality early learning. That increased spending, in turn, creates jobs. In short, early care and education is an economic sector through which we can create real economic development for our state.

The America's Edge research also shows that investment in early learning will save Montana businesses millions of dollars lost every year because of absenteeism related to employees' child care problems. On average, parents miss one to two weeks of work every year to deal with child care

arrangements. Not only will access to child care reduce the costs of absenteeism, it has also been proven to increase employee productivity again, a big boost to Montana businesses' bottom lines.

Our state's businesses will also be better positioned to attract skilled, educated individuals as the economy begins to recover. As our economy recovers, 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.

And a quality early care and education system will also ensure a future work force armed with the 21st century skills Montana 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 the nation in excess of \$3.7 billion every year for remedial education services and reduced earning potential.

And just as important as hard skills, workers need the soft skills 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. 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 Montana businesses maintaining our competitive edge. And the long-term return on investment is one that cannot be matched by almost any other public investment up to \$16 for every \$1 invested.

Our members of Congress each serve on key committees that will have the opportunity next year to strengthen our

businesses, economy and children. As a business owner, I will work to support their efforts and ask them to prioritize the federal investments in early learning, including Head Start, Early Head Start and the Child Care and Development Block Grant. It's just good business.

*Jim Parker is the owner of Westridge Creative and writes from Missoula.*