



# Local business leaders say early learning programs are key to economic recovery

Friday, Mar. 25, 2011

BY WILL BUSS - News-Democrat

EDWARDSVILLE -- Some metro-east business leaders believe and support the adage that children are the future and teaching them well -- and early -- will help lead the way toward economic recovery.

Local business and civic leaders shared new research Thursday from national business group America's Edge in downtown Edwardsville. The study showed that investments in early child care and education will further benefit the economy.

Tim Carpenter, the state director for America's Edge, estimated that \$84 million in economic activity generated by current spending from early care and education is generated in Madison and St. Clair counties. He said that early child care and education is an important economic sector in Illinois that already makes important contributions to the state's economy.

"A quality early learning program in our communities is a key component to competing successfully for skilled workers and new businesses as we come out of the recession," Carpenter said.

Carpenter also said that for every Illinois child who participates, another is unable. The research also finds that if all qualifying children had access to quality early care and education services -- at a cost of \$1.2 billion -- the state would generate \$2.6 billion in total new spending for Illinois businesses. That would include \$104 million in Madison and St. Clair counties and as many as 39,000 new jobs.

But this will mean more spending in these programs. Carpenter said the group is calling to restore previous funding levels from fiscal year 2009.

Collinsville Mayor John Miller said more than 2,000 3- and 4-year olds benefit from state-funded preschool in Madison County. Over the last decade, the county has seen enrollments double. However, more than 2,000 children in low- to middle-income families do not receive this benefit. Miller said programs like the state-funded Preschool for All program and the federally funded Head Start program are building the skills of the future work force that are essential to economic recovery and sustained economic growth.

"Few investments offer such dramatic and proven short- and long-term economic benefits as early care and education," Miller said. "With limited funds available to help businesses and our economic growth getting back on track, few investments make as much sense for our children's future and for the balance sheets of investments and high quality early care and education."

As president of Weinacht and Associates, a manufacturers' representative firm in Collinsville, and chairman of Collinsville Economic Development Commission, Kevin Weinacht said it is imperative investments are made in early childcare and education.

"Too many young people are not getting the training and education that they need and too many are dropping out and that's costing our businesses and economy," said Weinacht, who also is a member of America's Edge. "Each class of high school dropouts will make \$335 billion less over their lifetime than they did if they were high school graduates. That means less spending power, less contributions to the tax base and lower productivity. Early learning is a critical component in building a foundation that will ensure skilled work force in the future."