

Leaders urge state to invest in early education

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EDWARDSVILLE - Citing a recent study on the value of early education, business and community leaders on Thursday urged investments by the state.

America's Edge, a national membership organization focused on early education, reported the findings of an academic study that uses economic multipliers that contends early care and education programs provide \$2.1 billion in economic activity for Illinois, employ more than 55,000 workers and improve future workforce.

Higher learning has a high rate of return at \$16 for every \$1 spent, Collinsville Mayor John Miller said during a news conference Thursday in Edwardsville.

Specifically, the America's Edge report showed that Illinois' early learning investments actually are generating more sales of local goods and services from Illinois businesses than any other economic sector, including transportation, construction, wholesale and retail trade, and manufacturing.

"I'm impressed by the findings in the America's Edge report that one of the biggest boosts to Illinois businesses and the economy today is investments in quality early learning," RiverBend Growth Association President Monica Bristow said.

As the economy recovers over the next several years, America's Edge recommends an expansion of quality early care and education programs to serve more children in Illinois who qualify.

The state has lost 3,000 children in early education programs since July 1, simply from programs closing due to nonpayment by the state, said Tim Carpenter, Illinois director of America's Edge.

"With limited funds available, few investments make as much sense for our economic future and balance sheets as early care and education," Carpenter said.

Carpenter gave credit to the state for its state-funded preschool program; he also touted the federally funded Head Start program. But one goal of America's Edge is to restore the state's preschool program to fiscal year 2009 levels and bring back at least as many youngsters as the program had then.

America's Edge also wants to restore the state's child care assistance program, Carpenter said. "Our message is we really need to continue that," he emphasized. "The state's fiscal situation impacted this sector, and we urge state leaders to find a way to resolve that."

Miller emphasized that early care and education made children better prepared for elementary school, less likely to need special education services, less likely to be involved in crime and more likely to be employed.

Bristow echoed Miller on job creation.

"The report shows that early learning investments create and sustain jobs," she said. "In fact, every 10 people employed in the early learning sector create and support three jobs outside of the sector. That is real economic development."

Visit www.americasedge.org for more information.