

Sun Journal

Guest Columns

Early education key to future business success

By Chip Morrison

May 01, 2011 12:00 am

Business leaders in Androscoggin County look at their bottom lines every day and critically analyze how to generate the most return from every dollar invested. Making every dollar count is even more important as we continue to struggle with a very challenging economy.

To succeed in a global marketplace and keep Maine's businesses competitive, we must develop a pipeline of individuals with 21st century skills who will ensure sustained economic growth and security. A proven way to do that, with both short- and long-term economic benefits for our state and local economies, is to invest in quality early care and education.

Rigorous research demonstrates that children who participate in high-quality early learning programs are significantly more likely to enter school with the underlying skills needed to succeed in school and later in the workforce. These programs have been shown to increase language skills, lower the need for special education, and increase graduation rates. And children who attend quality early learning programs are more likely to be employed as adults — by as much as 22 percent. And the best part? Early learning funding will immediately boost our local economy.

A new report from the business leader group, America's Edge, shows investment in high-quality early learning is among the most effective ways to infuse millions of dollars into local and state economies, while creating new jobs in our communities. In fact, the America's Edge report states that, across the state, we can generate a total of \$1.78 in sales of local goods and services for every \$1 invested in quality early learning.

That investment is higher than investments in all other major sectors, including manufacturing, wholesale trade, retail trade, utilities and transportation. In fact, it is even higher than investments in farming, forestry, fishing and hunting.

In addition, research shows that investments in early learning will save Maine businesses millions of dollars lost every year because of absenteeism related to employees' child care problems. On average, parents miss five to nine days of work every year to deal with child care arrangements.

Not only will access to consistent, high-quality child care reduce the costs of absenteeism, it has also been shown to increase employee productivity — again, a big boost to Maine businesses' bottom lines on both sides of the balance sheet.

Our state's businesses will also be better positioned to attract skilled, educated individuals 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 skilled workers and new businesses, access to a quality early learning system is critical to families with young children who are deciding where to live.

From a cost-benefit analysis, quality early learning is also one of the best long-term investments that Maine can make. As much as \$16 for every \$1 invested will be returned to our communities, because children who participate in these programs grow up to become better-educated and more productive workers, with far less remedial education or criminal costs to society. That is a return on investment virtually unmatched by any other public investment.

In the coming months, our federal policy-makers will be making crucial decisions about funding for critical early learning programs such as Head Start, Early Head Start and the Child Care and Development Block Grant. I urge our Congressional delegation to maintain funding levels for these programs, which is one of the most effective ways to revitalize our local economy, while building a strong foundation for long-term economic growth.

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