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## **Business leaders across the state should support early learning programs**

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While our state's 2010 budget does not increase investments in quality child care and pre-kindergarten programs, the Legislature has passed three bills that strengthen and improve the state's early learning policies and guarantee that all at-risk children will eventually have access to high-quality early learning programs that will prepare them for success in school.

At a time when other states are cutting these programs, this is good news for hundreds of local businesses, as well as for parents, teachers and children. As a businessman, I understand that a well-educated work force is the engine that drives economic success. That's why I have focused my energy on supporting K-12 and higher education as a volunteer and contributor to Yelm Dollars for

Scholars, as well as by serving on the board of trustees of the WSU Foundation.

I have come to learn that early childhood education plays a critical role in preparing children to succeed in school, graduate and ultimately become the skilled employees businesses need. To remain competitive in the global marketplace, businesses need employees with 21st century skills — not just reading and math skills, but the ability to be communicators, collaborators and critical thinkers. Research confirms that high-quality early learning is key to the development of those skills, with a return on investment that cannot be matched by almost any other public investment: up to \$16 for every \$1 invested.

Clearly, investing in early learning is a smart, long-term investment and that's a major reason why I believe the business community should support early education. But there is a compelling and more immediate reason why business leaders should rally behind the Legislature's efforts to improve early learning programs now. The early care and education sector is a very viable economic sector in Washington state, and investments in that sector will provide relief today to businesses throughout the state. In fact, new research by the national business group America's Edge concludes that investment in quality early learning will provide a surprisingly big boost to the local economy.

The research shows that for every \$1

invested in early care and education, nearly \$2 is generated in additional sales of local goods and services. And the research shows that nearly all of these dollars generated in Washington would stay in Washington — maximizing the benefits for local businesses and communities. In turn, the increased spending on local goods and services will create jobs in our state, not only in the early care and education sector, but also in businesses that serve that sector.

In addition, quality child care and prekindergarten programs boost businesses' bottom lines by helping to reduce employee absenteeism and turnover in the current work force. According to a study by Cornell University, absenteeism caused by working parents missing work due to

child care problems cost U.S. businesses \$3 billion every year.

Early learning programs will reduce that absenteeism, which will not only save local businesses money, but will increase work-force productivity because parents can focus more on their jobs and not on child care arrangements. Moreover, expanding these programs also would attract new skilled workers and businesses to our state in the same way as does a quality K-12 education system.

These short-term results for businesses' bottom lines — coupled with the long-term gains — are impressive. Given the severe pressure on our state budget, it makes sense to invest our limited funds in programs that will help jump-start our economy

and provide the greatest return on investment. Washington state policy makers should prioritize investments in early education as real economic development that will inject thousands of additional dollars into local businesses, while also creating much needed jobs. I'm convinced that focusing on education and care for our youngest children is a crucial piece of the puzzle for the economic revitalization of our state.

That is why I strongly urge the governor to sign the legislation on early learning recently approved by our state Legislature.

**Larry Schorno is a retired livestock exporter from Yelm.**