heraldsun.com

Marsha Basloe: Early childhood education sensible

By Marsh Basloe : Guest Columnist
The Herald-Sun
Oct 12, 2008

I am passionate about the importance of investing in early childhood education. Given my position as executive director of the Durham Partnership for Children, that is probably not surprising.

But I am joined in this passion by a Nobel Prize-winning economics professor, high ranking analysts at the Federal Reserve Bank and researchers at the Rand Corporation, among many other financial types. We all agree that making an investment in our society's youngest children is critical -- not only to their success, but to the success of our nation's economy.

In economic development circles, a great deal of focus has been placed on growing talent by focusing on the middle school and high school years. And while it is important that our public schools have strong mentoring programs and financial support, it is imperative to turn our sights to the earliest years. Workforce development starts with young children. We must grow our talent from the beginning to ensure that we have an educated workforce for the future.

The first three years of a child's life are a period of incredible growth and form the foundation for lifelong success. Neuroscientists have shown that the vast majority of the brain's synapses -- or connections among brain cells -- are formed between birth and age three. This research reinforces the importance of early childhood education for all children.

In 2007, James Heckman -- an economics professor at the University of Chicago who was awarded the 2000 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences -- gave a presentation entitled, "Investing in Disadvantaged Young Children Is Good Economics and Good Public Policy." It included the following key points:

* Ability gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged children start young.

* The formation of life skills is cyclical in nature so skill begets skill; motivation begets motivation. If a child is not motivated and stimulated to learn early in life, the more likely it is that, as an adult, the child will fail in social and economic life.

* Early interventions promote schooling, reduce crime, promote workforce productivity and reduce teen pregnancy.

* These interventions are estimated to have high benefit/cost ratios and rates of return.

A similar case is made by Arthur Rolnick, senior vice president and director of research at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, and Rob Grunewald, a senior economist at the Federal Reserve. The duo has published a series of papers showing that investments in early childhood development for at-risk children pay a high public return.

"Helping our youngest children develop their life and learning skills results in better citizens and more productive workers," they say. One of their studies found that "the potential annual return from focused, high-quality early childhood development programs might be as high as 16 percent (inflation adjusted)."

Heckman, Rolnick and Grunewald aren't lone voices in the wilderness advocating the importance of investing in early education. The RAND Corporation, a nonprofit research organization, recently published a paper, "The Economics of Early Childhood Policy: What the Dismal Science has to Say about Investing in Children."

Citing the economic concepts of human capital theory and monetary "payoffs" from investments in early childhood services, the paper describes how a range of experts has called for greater public spending on early childhood programs. The paper notes that increased investment in early childhood results in government savings by leading to less need for social services later in life and increased earnings by individuals -- which in turn leads to greater tax revenue for the government.

The findings are clear: investing in early-childhood education by the business community -- in partnership with the government and nonprofit foundations -- can reap extraordinarily high economic returns and benefits that are low-risk and long-lived. Now is the time to step back and take a long-term look at our community's quality of life.

On Thursday, Durham's Partnership for Children will host David Lawrence, Jr., former publisher of The Miami-Herald, as the keynote speaker at its annual meeting at the Duke Hilton. (See www.dpfc.net). Lawrence retired in 1999 to work in the area of early childhood development and readiness. He is president of The Early Childhood Initiative Foundation and "University Scholar for Early Childhood Development and Readiness" at the University of Florida. We hope to learn from Lawrence's work as Durham develops essential, long-term strategies to ensure our children's success in school and in life.

With the economic challenges in our country and state today, we cannot merely provide intervention. We must plan for the future. We can do that by making young children a priority.

As Smart Start recently received notice of a cut in funding, I couldn't help but think about the recent vote investing in our financial industry. What could we do with $700 billion if we invested the money in our young children? What would our world look like in 15 to 18 years if all young children had what they needed to succeed?

I urge voters to ask all candidates -- national, state and local -- about their plans for investing in our young children. Let's plan to make an investment that will pay dividends for years to come.

Marsha Basloe is executive director of Durham's Partnership for Children