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Early childhood education needs our support

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I've never built a house, but I do know that having had the good fortune to be able to buy one, the first thing the inspector did was make sure the foundation was solid and could handle the structure above it. This seems like a simple concept but one that we often miss when transferring this information to other areas including the development of our young children for the future.

Current challenges we as a country face -- like competing in the global job market, job training during the recession and high school dropout rates -- all affect our educational agenda. We need to examine these problems at the base, at the foundation of these issues.

When our children are falling behind in school, exhibiting behavioral problems and are disconnected in middle school, we look to programs to intervene. Intervention programs are important. We must develop the future by ensuring our youngest children have a solid foundation with opportunities for high-quality early-learning experiences, strong family support programs and access to the best health care. After all, if the foundation is poured correctly, then it will not need repairs to the same extent in the future.

Early childhood education is the foundation for life. If we truly value education as a community and want homegrown talent to compete in our prestigious local institutions of higher learning and

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want our Durham children to tap local well-paying jobs -- both of which have brought much notoriety to this region -- we can't only rely on traditional approaches to close our achievement gap.

Early childhood education is the foundation of learning. Ninety percent of a child's brain is developed by the age of 3. Studies show that young children -- regardless of economic standing -- who are exposed to an educational environment that nurtures their social, emotional and cognitive skills continue to do better later. Leading economists, including Nobel Laureate James Heckman, place a return on investment of quality early childhood education between \$7 and \$12 for every \$1 spent.

Sadly, our legislators are putting these programs -- strategies that support school readiness for young children who need a strong foundation for success -- on the chopping block. Durham's Partnership for Children, the administrator of Durham's early childhood system, is facing unprecedented cuts that would diminish needed services that improve early care and education settings, offer access to quality child care, provide health services and support families raising their children.

There's no arguing that our legislators must make difficult decisions, but if we cut the foundation of learning across the state, how will our structure be stronger in the future? If our foundation is weak, then we are building a rocky future.

If you would like to make a difference in Durham, visit www.Champions4YoungChildren.net and contact your elected officials and tell them not to cut the foundation of learning for our youngest children. The vitality and future strength of our local and state economies depend on our investments in a comprehensive education system that begins at birth. A child's life should not depend on the economic situation of our state.

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

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