



The Republican.

Nobel laureate touts preschool

Tuesday, November 20, 2007

By **MARLA A. GOLDBERG**
mgoldberg@repub.com

SPRINGFIELD - A Nobel prize-winning economist told about 200 business leaders yesterday that investing in quality education for preschool children can yield far greater returns than costly programs aimed at struggling teenagers and illiterate adults.

"A better alternative is to increase investment in the early years, and avoid the need for remediation," said James J. Heckman, of the University of Chicago's Center for Economic Research, who was keynote speaker at a "Building a Better Workforce" conference organized by the Irene E. and George A. Davis Foundation. The Springfield-based foundation's Cherish Every Child Initiative is leading a coalition that hopes to make Springfield a pilot city for universal prekindergarten.

Cherish Every Child, in literature distributed yesterday, urged businesses to offer employee child-care benefits and college-savings accounts, and to advocate for universal high-quality early education.

Margaret Blood, founder of the Boston-based nonprofit Strategies for Children Inc., praised the Davis Foundation and Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company for working to improve early education. "Powerless children need powerful friends," Blood said. "I felt, since starting this work, that Western Massachusetts would lead the way for young children."

Blood, who is director of the Early Education for All Campaign, said Massachusetts is among the nation's least affordable states for child care, while preschool teachers here earn poverty-level wages and programs aren't subject to accreditation standards.

Heckman cited a long-running study by the Michigan-based High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, which tracked 123 low-income, low-IQ children born in the early 1960s. About half were randomly chosen to attend the Perry Preschool at ages 3 and 4. Children who spent 2½ hours a day at the preschool, and whose families received home visits, derived lifelong benefits, according to study results. There was a surge in IQ during enrollment, followed by better high school graduation rates, along with stronger earning power and fewer arrests by age 40.

"This program didn't make kids smarter, it motivated them ... and that motivation stayed with them over the course of their lives," Heckman said.

Meanwhile, Heckman said adult literacy programs have "a very poor track record," while GED and youth Job Corps efforts have disappointing results. Public policy tends to focus on adolescents, Heckman said, while research indicates the most important window for learning is from infancy to age 5. "Basically, we ignore the dynamics of skill formation," he said.

Heckman shared the 2000 Nobel Prize in economics with Daniel L. McFadden of the University of California at Berkeley.

Paul E. Harrington, associate director of the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University, and Maura Banta, corporate communications manager for IBM, also spoke. Panelists included Michael D. Niziolek, a vice president at Hasbro Games in East Longmeadow; lawyer Paul S. Doherty, founder of Doherty, Wallace, Pillsbury & Murphy; and Isolda Ortega-Bustamante, director of Engaging Latino Communities for Education, among others.

The conference was held in the MassMutual room at the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame.

©2007 The Republican

© 2007 MassLive.com All Rights Reserved.