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GIVING BACK

Early learning is smart economic development

by Kathy Plomin

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If you don't know where you're going, it's hard to get there. That statement is attributed to baseball great Casey Stengel, but also it applies to our community.

What does success look like for us? Most of us would say a strong, healthy economy that's creating, growing and attracting good jobs; a good quality of life for our families; good schools that prepare our kids for the world-class workforce of the future. We measure that in terms of growth – tax dollars supporting our schools and infrastructure, job growth in the right industries and growth of community prosperity in general.

Here's another view of success – our children achieving success in school, and on the way to achieving success in life. How do we get there from here?

The equation for a child's success is not complex. Research shows that a loving, nurturing environment and everyday learning opportunities are what build a solid foundation for future learning and school success. You see it in your own children and grandchildren. Children need strong families, good early learning experiences, good health and supportive communities to succeed.

Study after study shows that a child who starts kindergarten with the social, emotional and cognitive skills needed for success is more likely to do well in school, graduate and go on to college – and is more likely to become the kind of worker that helps our community compete for the world-class jobs of tomorrow.

The equation for success may be simple, but it's not easy. We're failing too many of our children, according to the numbers. Our children are starting school without the basic skills they need to succeed. The situation is even worse for children in low-wage families, who are often two years further behind. By the third grade, the foundation is set. There's a lot of debate in our country about closing the achievement gap, but there's not enough conversation about the fact that we're losing that battle before our children ever step foot in the classroom.

Experts say that children who lack the necessary literacy and language skills by the third grade simply don't catch up. Until third grade, children learn to read; from third grade on, they read to learn. These are the children teachers predict will drop out of high school, likely ending up as unwed parents, on the streets or in jail. Unfortunately, these teacher predictions are mostly right on. The children pay – and we pay.

Whether we're talking about training the workforce of the future, or access to good, safe child care to give today's workers peace of mind when they're at work and can't be with their children, the fact is that education is economic development. Experts say early childhood education is critical to building a strong economy and a strong workforce.

According to Nobel Laureate economist James Heckman, programs targeting children from disadvantaged families have the greatest economic and social returns.

The 40-year High/Scope Perry Preschool research makes the case that high-quality early learning experiences set children up for success in school, work and life. Research shows that investing \$1 in a child's success early on saves \$17 down the road, with tangible results measured in lower crime, fewer single parents and higher individual earnings and education levels.

Quality early learning reduces:

- crime rates;

- teenage pregnancy;
- welfare dependency;
- job training costs;
- special education cost; and
- grade repetition.

Quality early learning increases:

- success in school;
- graduation rates;
- workforce readiness;
- job productivity; and
- community engagement.

Longitudinal studies show that increased investment in early learning means states spend less in special education and juvenile justice services. Over the long term, state and federal budgets for welfare and criminal justice systems are impacted as well.

But as high-skill, high-wage jobs demand more from workers, the children who most need the tools for success are getting the fewest.

Roughly 46 percent of America's kindergarteners are coming to school at risk for failure, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

The poorest children start school one to two years behind.

The return on investment is clear: investing in early learning in children's early years pays off. Heckman puts it this way: "Invest in the very young."

After much research, Art Rolnick with the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis concluded that early childhood development is a much better economic development tool than other economic development schemes. "In the future, any proposed economic development ... should have early childhood education at the top," he said. "The return on investment from early childhood development is extraordinary, resulting in better working public schools, more educated workers and less crime."

As Rolnick argues, now is the time to capitalize on this knowledge. The message today is a simple one: early learning matters – for today and for tomorrow.