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COLUMN: Invest in early childhood resources

*By Jon Stellmacher
for the Wausau Daily Herald*

As Wisconsin and the nation face a weak economy and fiscal challenges in both the public and private sectors, we need to use available funds wisely. One of the most effective investments we can make is to ensure that our children have a great start.

Investing our time and resources in children from the very earliest ages pays off in school readiness in the short run -- and in the long term, in lower crime rates, lower social program costs and increased employability. According to James Heckman, a Nobel Laureate economist from the University of Chicago, investments in high-quality early education programs have the highest rate of return of any social investment.

Why is early investment so effective? According to Heckman and child development experts like those at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Waisman Center, the astonishing brain development that happens in a child's first five years sets the foundation for all learning and development that follows. Young children who have language-rich environments are likely to be prepared for reading in school. Children without those early learning experiences are more likely to fall behind their peers and struggle to catch up in school.

Investing early makes sense. It is much easier and less costly to help children develop optimally to begin with than to try to fix learning deficits later on. There is strong evidence that high-quality early education is not only a cost-effective investment, but yields particularly high returns when children from disadvantaged backgrounds are targeted. The Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis estimates that high-quality early education provides a 16 percent return on every dollar invested. A study by the Rand Corp. of early childhood intervention programs showed about \$5 in benefits for every dollar invested.

Whatever the exact cost/benefit ratio, it is clear that high-quality early learning programs work and that they produce significant benefits to our communities over time.

The situation for young children has changed dramatically over the last 40 years. In the mid-1970s the majority of young children had at least one parent at home. Today in Wisconsin, 72 percent of children under age 6 have all available parents in the workforce. Parents want help in ensuring that their children are in safe, nurturing settings that facilitate their physical, emotional, and intellectual development. Enhancing early learning is not only the right thing to do for children; it is a wise investment in Wisconsin's future.

So what are we to do? If you're the parent of a young child, shower them with your attention and with your love. If you're an employer, adopt family-friendly policies to support parents and give them the opportunity to nurture their children. Share resources in your local community to support early childhood investments.

At Thrivent Financial for Lutherans, we've identified early childhood investment as one of our key target areas for local investment, contributing more than \$250,000 last year alone to help fund various initiatives for young children.

There's no question that effective programming will require public/private collaboration at the local, state, and national level. All of us must consider what role we as individuals can play, and those of us

who are business leaders should consider what role our organizations can and should play as well. Investments now in young lives will shape the future of our society, pay the bills for our generation's economic and environmental impact, and fund the social support programs we will depend upon when we retire.

In the end, it's not just a matter of good sense; it's a matter of social conscience as well.

Jon Stellmacher of Appleton is a senior vice president at Thrivent Financial for Lutherans. He is a member of the Governor's State Advisory Council on Early Childhood Education and Care and a member of the Partnership for Wisconsin's Economic Success.
