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Can Pierce County build an early-learning model?

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The best way to improve schools is to improve the students sent to them,” Nobel economics laureate James Heckman writes.

To put it another way, there is no smarter investment a nation, state or community can make than to invest in preparing children to learn – beginning at birth. It is far more effective than all other means of intervention later in life. The benefit-cost ratio is eight to one.

This is a fact. Powerful research proves it. Pierce County may get a chance to employ this knowledge in an effective and innovative way – and to benefit enormously as a result.

Stirred by such findings, United Way of Pierce County has initiated a potentially far-reaching effort to make sure more children – especially disadvantaged children – begin school ready to learn.

United Way’s goal is a countywide “system” of early learning. Today there are various pieces of early-learning initiatives in Pierce County, but they fall short of being a coordinated system that targets resources where they will do the most good.

This effort is in an early stage, far from takeoff. But if all the community players with the ability to contribute come to the table, something extraordinary could be achieved.

United Way and Russell Investment Co. CEO Craig Ueland hosted a meeting of community leaders last week to hear a panel of experts talk about the importance of early learning. Guests heard about now-familiar research that shows children are “born to learn,” as one panelist put it. But if that learning capacity is not nurtured in the critical first three years of life, it is difficult to make up the gap later. Children who start school behind tend to fall farther behind the rest of the way.

That is the reason Gov. Chris Gregoire and the Legislature have created a new state Department of Early Learning and two model early-learning centers. Efforts to improve the quality of day care and preschool programs statewide also stem from this new understanding.

Actually creating a system of early learning in Pierce County is a tall order, as United Way CEO Rick Allen cautioned. United Way hopes a community consortium will come together to attempt it. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is highly interested in the concept and might provide multi-year funding if a sound structure and business plan are developed.

There is nothing Pierce County needs so much as a stronger pool of human capital – more children who stay in school and graduate capable of making their way in an increasingly competitive workplace. Promoting early learning is a good way to get there.

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