

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

Leaders stress importance of early education to business

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BANGOR, Maine — Approximately 35,000 Maine children under the age of 5 have no access to early education programs that studies show would significantly improve their futures, according to a report from a national business organization.

Three area businessmen — John Bragg, president of N.H. Bragg and Sons, Arthur Comstock, a retired banker and president of AACOM Business Consulting, and Jerry Whalen, vice president of Eastern Maine Healthcare Systems — and other local members of the business group America's Edge gathered Wednesday at the Head Start Center at Eastern Maine Community College to unveil the report, titled "Strengthening Maine Businesses through Investments in Early Care and Education."

"Across the U.S., 60 percent of three to five-year-olds do not have the basic skills needed to enter kindergarten — counting to 10 and knowing the alphabet," said Bragg.

Without those basic educational skills, those children start from behind, he said.

"We must start before that first day of kindergarten," Bragg said.

The America's Edge report states that every dollar spent on early child education generates 78 cents in new spending in Maine to boost to the state's economy.

"We need to ensure when we invest a dollar we get the best return," said Whalen.

"Investing in high-quality early learning is one of the smartest ways to spend investment dollars."

Such an investment would lead to more jobs and increased sales of local goods and services, resulting in a better economy while providing Maine's youth with an educational foundation, Comstock said.

America's Edge is a national group of business leaders who advocate for investing in early childhood programs to strengthen business. The report unveiled Wednesday states that educating all young Mainers under age 5 in pre-kindergarten programs would require an investment of \$145 million.

"That investment would yield \$115 million in additional sales in Maine's economy," the report states. "And most of these dollars generated in Maine would stay in Maine."

Investing in the state's future leaders makes sense, Bragg said.

"Quality early learning is a proven solution," he said.

Bragg noted that "in Maine, 22 percent of high school students don't graduate on time" and therefore are not prepared to enter the work force.

In addition to Comstock, Bragg and Whalen, other local business leaders also came out to support the event.

"Early childhood education is key," Stephanie Cotsirilos, an Orono lawyer who is a member of America's Edge, said just before the press conference. "It's the best investment around."

Penobscot County Sheriff Glenn Ross, Bangor Police Chief Ron Gastia, Brewer Police Chief Perry Antone, and other area law enforcement officers also are members of the organization because they understand that students who drop out of school are more likely to commit crimes later in life and go to jail, Bangor businessman Dan Tremble said.

Cotsirilos; Tremble; Judy Horan, president and general manager of WLBZ-TV, Channel 2 and the Rev. Bob Carlson, president of Penobscot Community Health Care, stood beside the podium to show their support of early education funding.

"Few investments make as much sense as investing in children's futures," Comstock said.