

Scales: Early education offers great returns

Congress must protect such programs as it retools nation's budget

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Roughly half of Michigan's high school graduates are not planning to attend college this fall and many instead are heading into a precarious job market, with the state's unemployment rate still above 10 percent.

I can't help but worry about their job prospects. It's a rough-and-tumble economy, and our education numbers are grim. In Michigan, 25 percent of high school students don't graduate on time, and many who do graduate do not have the skills they need to succeed in the working world. According to a recent study by the business leaders organization, America's Edge, employers are reporting a dearth of qualified workers with the appropriate training and skills that employers now demand.

Even before the jobless rate rose, a 2006 survey found over 40 percent of employers complaining that high school graduates were not properly prepared to join the workforce. Over 80 percent of employers reported deficiencies in applicants' written

communication; over 70 percent reported deficiencies in professionalism; and nearly 70 percent found deficiencies in the ability of applicants to think critically.

How can we do a better job in supplying Michigan businesses with the workers they need? The answer may surprise you, but the research is clear: Start educating our children earlier and do it better. Studies have confirmed that children participating in quality early learning programs are significantly more likely to enter school with the underlying skills they need to succeed in school and later in the workforce.

Such programs increase language skills, lower the need for special education and increase graduation rates. The most recent major 25-year follow-up study of the benefits of quality early learning programs appeared in the journal *Science* in June, noting that investments in Chicago's Child-Parent Centers returned \$10 for every \$1 invested, an amazing rate of return.

Supporting high-quality early care and education programs not only helps provide employers with more qualified workers over the long term, but can also provide a surprisingly big boost to local Michigan businesses in the short term. The America's Edge research found that Michigan can generate a total of \$2.11 for every \$1 invested in quality early learning - a greater return than investments in more "traditional" economic sectors like manufacturing, transportation, construction, and wholesale and retail trade.

What's more, support for these programs equates into costs savings for businesses by reducing job absenteeism and turnover for working parents - a problem that costs U.S. businesses \$3 billion each year.

The bottom line: Quality early education works. That's why I am calling on Michigan's congressional delegation to protect and prioritize these programs as Congress works to get our nation's fiscal house in order during debt reduction negotiations. Some budget mechanisms under consideration, such as spending caps or automatic across-the-board cuts, would hinder our ability to prioritize investments in highly cost-effective programs.

Our state policy makers recognized the value of early care and education in the budget debate this year, even though our state fiscal outlook is grim. We need our congressional representatives to do the same.

Milton L. Scales is president of *M.L. Scales & Associates LLC* in Okemos.