

# Bangor Daily News

## Early education a sound investment

By Bill Miller and Dan Tremble, Special to the BDN

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As with any new year, 2012 will be greeted with well wishes for a bright and prosperous future. But if you're part of Maine's business community, you may not share that sentiment.

Unemployment across the state remains historically high, above 7 percent, with more than 50,000 residents looking for work. And just as troubling, the wellspring of Maine's work force, our education system, continues to struggle with poor academic performance.

Consider these facts: 68 percent of fourth graders in our state read below grade level. More than 60 percent of eighth graders perform below grade level in reading and math, and more than one in five of Maine's high school students won't graduate on time. This poor school performance impacts our businesses.

Even before the recession, a national survey of employers revealed businesses were facing major deficiencies in the work force, with many new employees lacking communication skills, a sense of professionalism and the ability to think critically under pressure.

So how can we do a better job in supplying our businesses with the workers they need?

The answer may seem unconventional, but the research is clear: Start educating our children earlier and do it better.

Studies have confirmed that kids participating in quality early learning programs are notably more likely to enter school with the underlying skills they need to succeed, both academically and later in the work force.

Such programs can increase language skills, lower the need for special education and increase graduation rates for their participants. And particularly important to employers, quality early learning programs increase rates of employment for graduates by as much as 22 percent at age 40.

And what's more, they're economically sound. The most recent major 25-year follow-up study of the benefits of quality early learning programs appeared in the journal *Science* in June, and noted that investments in Chicago's Child-Parent Centers returned \$10 for every \$1 invested.

That's a fantastic rate of return. And that's not mentioning the immediate benefits that early education provides.

According to the national business leaders organization, America's Edge, investments in quality early learning generate as much or more in new sales as Maine's investments in construction, transportation or farming, forestry, fishing and hunting. In fact, every \$1 invested in early learning will generate a total of \$1.78 in sales for local businesses.

Conversely, we stand to lose the same amount for every dollar of funding we cut.

We should seriously consider the economic windfall that early education provides our state, before, in an effort to rein in costs, we shortchange both our kids and our economy.

The bottom line: quality early learning works. That's why we are hoping the Legislature will protect Maine's funding for these programs as policymakers in Augusta hash out a solution to a budget shortfall for the Department of Health and Human Services.

By chopping support for high-quality early education, we not only hurt Maine's kids, we also damage our economy's pipeline of skilled workers. That's something Mainers can't afford. It's as simple as that.

*Bill Miller owns Miller's Drug Store and Dan Tremble owns Fairmount Market; both are in Bangor.*