

Early learning key to economic future

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Question: What is a proven way for Montana's elected leaders to stimulate our local economy, increase business sales and improve our economic outlook over the long term while also attracting new businesses and skilled workers to our state?

Answer: invest in quality early learning programs.

Our state has weathered the economic downturn better than most. But we must always look for ways to generate economic activity to continue our economic growth.

According to the business leaders group, America's Edge, investing in quality early learning will actually boost our economy today. A report from the group shows that investing in early care and education programs will generate more sales of local goods and services from Montana business than investments in many other economic sectors.

For every \$1 invested, in fact, a total of \$1.61 is generated across Montana communities — comparable to investments in construction, transportation, utilities and even mining, oil and gas.

Research also shows that access to quality early learning reduces absenteeism and increases productivity. In Montana, 64 percent of children under the age of six have both or their only parent in the workforce.

The average working parent in America misses five to nine days of work each year because of child care arrangement problems. And according to a study from Cornell University, this problem costs U.S. business \$3 billion every year. Research confirms that if parents have quality early care and education available in their communities, not only does absenteeism and turnover go down, but retention and productivity goes up. That is good for businesses on both sides of their balance sheets.

But just as such programs improve sales and efficiency for businesses already here, access to quality early learning could also help attract more businesses and skilled workers to our state.

Think about it: Just as a quality K-12 system is a strong incentive for businesses and individuals to relocate, so too can a quality early education system be a draw — especially for workers with young children.

Investments in early care and education provide a foundation for future economic growth and a skilled workforce. Early learning can help ensure that we have a well-prepared homegrown workforce down the line with the skills businesses need in an innovation-driven world.

In fact, kids who participate in high quality early-learning programs are up to 44 percent more likely to graduate from high school, are 22 percent more likely to be employed, and

can have median earnings that are 36 percent higher as adults than those who did not participate in these programs.

These outcomes translate into an enormous return on investment — as much as \$16 for every \$1 invested.

Our state does not currently have a state-funded pre-K program. The federally funded Head Start program serves more than 5,400 children in our state. But only 15 percent of 3-year-olds and 22 percent of 4-year-olds were enrolled in Head Start or a special education preschool program. Approximately 38,000 children under age five are not served by regulated early care and education settings.

I applaud our congressional delegation for its role in providing increased funding in fiscal year 2012 for critical programs like Head Start, Early Head Start and the Child Care and Development Block Grant programs. We must now protect that funding, even in these tough budget times.

Congress, through the appropriations process for fiscal year 2013 has an opportunity to improve the quality of, and access to, early care and education through funding for these programs.

I urge senators Max Baucus, Jon Tester, and Congressman Denny Rehberg to do so by maintaining funding for these crucial investments, especially to sustain and enhance quality improvements.

As a business person, I recognize the continuing, unprecedented challenge faced in reducing the federal budget deficit. We must get the best return on every dollar we invest. Investing in early learning programs meets that test.

Businessman Shane Ford lives at 21 Holly Lane in Butte.