

THE NEWS & OBSERVER

Cutting pre-K not good for anyone in NC – businesses, too

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By Ann Goodnight and Richard L. McNeel

To meet the future demand for a more skilled and educated workforce, North Carolina must invest in what works: high-quality early care and education.

We agree with Gov. Pat McCrory and many of our state lawmakers that proficiency in reading by the third grade will help children succeed in our K-12 system and graduate from high school ready for college and career. High-quality early-learning programs are crucial to achieving that goal.

Children who participate in these programs are more likely to graduate from high school, hold a job considered semi-skilled or higher, attain a four-year degree and earn more as adults. And that is good for our businesses and our state's economy.

Key to these economic outcomes are two critical factors: the quality of the programs and access to the programs.

- **Quality:** Some policymakers have been led to believe that improvements in school performance for children in early learning programs diminish as they get into elementary school. Some call it “fade-out.”

But decades of data and longitudinal studies do not support this conclusion when early learning programs are high-quality.

A 2012 Duke University study of our state's early learning programs shows North Carolina third-graders have higher standardized reading and math scores and lower special education placement rates in those counties with more funding for those programs. In fact, researchers found that the expected savings in reduced special education and instructional costs for children in these programs is at least equal to the cost of the programs – a break-even or savings of taxpayer money.

This study is not alone. A quantitative statistical analysis of 123 studies across four decades of early education research – a meta analysis – found that by third grade, one-third of the achievement gap can be closed by early education.

North Carolina is already a national model for high-quality early learning programs, being the second state to enact a Quality Rating and Improvement System. North Carolina's programs have the quality components that get the results businesses want: appropriate teacher-to-child ratios, teachers educated in early childhood development, strong parental involvement and coaching, and screening and referral services to catch problems early.

North Carolina also leads the country in tying subsidies for child care to the quality of the programs. Programs receiving subsidies must have a star rating of three or higher.

Today, 70 percent of all young children in North Carolina's regulated early learning programs attend high-quality programs rated with four or five stars.

- **Access:** Currently, parents – our workforce – can receive state financial assistance to place their children in our quality early learning programs, such as N.C. Pre-K, if their income is at or below \$33,021

for a family of four. Some lawmakers are considering cutting that eligibility in half, which would make our state among the five most restrictive for accessing early learning programs.

Cutting eligibility is not good for our businesses. In North Carolina, 65 percent of children under age 6 have both or their only parent in the workforce. The median income in North Carolina is \$44,083, while the annual cost of a quality early learning program is \$7,803.

It does not take a financial expert to understand that these programs would simply be out of reach for too many working families without financial assistance.

We support McCrory's proposal to pay for 5,000 more children in our N.C. Pre-K program.

We also support maintaining current levels of eligibility so children can access the quality programs our state has created. The definition of "eligibility" should not be tied to a single year's budget target.

It should be tied to ensuring that North Carolina working families can place their children in programs that will strengthen our future workforce and economic growth.

If we are serious about improving North Carolina's economic future, we must address the issue of our sadly leaking education pipeline.

Our children's educational needs should be served at the very beginning by investing in high-quality preschool rather than trying to remediate later.

Ann Goodnight is director of Community Relations at SAS. Richard L. McNeel is chairman of the board at Lord Corporation. Harvey Schmitt, president and CEO of the Greater Raleigh Chamber of Commerce, also contributed.

Read more here: <http://www.newsobserver.com/2013/05/05/2868818/cutting-pre-k-not-good-for-anyone.html#storylink=cpy>