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Russ Meyer and Barry Downing: Invest now in early education

By Russ Meyer and Barry Downing

A recent survey by the Annie E. Casey Foundation found that 19 percent of Kansas children are living below the poverty line. That's nearly 1 in 5.

More than half of 3- to 4-year-olds in Kansas are not attending preschool. Study after study has proved that early education is the essential foundation for success in school, college, career and life. We can fight poverty and move to greater productivity by investing more in quality early education for disadvantaged children.

Our fast-growing population of poor children poses a great risk for failure in school and in later life. Poor kids who fail in our schools reflect alarming later life difficulties, from teen pregnancy, drug abuse, gang involvement, criminal activity, welfare use and many other outcomes that cost our community money and pain. Conversely, a well-educated citizenry makes for a better community for our children and grandchildren.

As businesspeople, we know that great human capital – the skills and abilities of people – creates great financial success. More and more, our Kansas businesses compete in a global marketplace where success relies on a highly educated workforce. U.S. children now rank 22nd among the top 33 developed nations in educational achievement scores (behind nations such as Finland, South Korea and Brazil).

Our Kansas economic growth cannot prosper without better-educated workers. And the first step to better education is to ensure that every child arrives at kindergarten ready to learn.

We're not alone in our determination to make wise investments in building skills. Nobel laureate economist James Heckman has shown that a lack of skills, particularly those developed from birth to age 5, is more a cause of poverty than income alone. If you're poor and skilled, you won't be poor for long. If you're poor and unskilled, you have few chances for success in a highly competitive economy.

The best time to invest in skills development is from birth to age 5, when the brain develops rapidly to build the foundational cognitive and character abilities necessary for success in school, health, career and life. This makes early childhood education programs not only one of the best weapons to fight poverty but one of the best ways to create a stronger economy for all Kansans.

Heckman's analysis of one preschool program for disadvantaged children shows a 7 to 10 percent per year return on investment based on increased school and career achievement as well as reduced costs in remedial education, health and the criminal-justice system. Big problems facing our state, such as poor health, dropout rates, poverty and crime, can be addressed by investing in developmental opportunities for at-risk children. In doing so, we can substantially reduce the costs to taxpayers.

Early childhood education is a smart financial investment that makes dollars and sense for Kansas. Clearly, early childhood education is a top-line driver of success for children, families, communities and our economy. The question is not whether we should do this, but how quickly can we get it done. Now is the time.

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