

Investing in kids will pay off for Maine

By Glenn Ross

We hear more and more discussions about improving Maine's economy. Intrinsic to those discussions are strategies to prepare future generations of workers to compete in the global marketplaces of today and the future. The majority of this effort is placed on the education and training of Maine's young people during their high school and postsecondary years. In reality, to be truly successful, these conversations, and increased efforts, need to start much earlier — during the crucial first years of life when 85 percent of brain capacity is developed.

To build healthy and productive adults, we must start by building healthy brains in our infants and toddlers.

On Sept. 17, Maine celebrated "Step up for Kids Day" and speakers on the capital steps talked about the importance of investing in kids. On Sept. 18, the Maine Development Foundation, an organization with a mission of "long-term" economic investment in Maine, had as their annual meeting topic "Investing in our most precious assets." The day focused on why investing in kids will pay off in Maine.

We were impressed and intrigued by the relatively new science of early brain development. And our eyes were opened by the fact that during the time when a person establishes the neurological connections that lay the foundation for all intellectual, emotional, social, moral and physical development, we, as a state and as a society, invest the least financial resources.

In fact, compared to every dollar spent on school-age children, Maine invests less than nine cents on our youngest children.

The issue of high quality early childhood education can no longer be a discussion for only those in the child care sector. It significantly affects all of our futures' — so everyone should be entering into the kinds of discussions that took place at this recent conference — and sharing those discussions with our public policymakers. The issue is not just for parents. It's not just for teachers. It's for every Maine citizen because we all have a stake in the outcomes.

Just like the foundation of a house or office building, brain architecture and all the neurological wiring that goes with it are built from the bottom up. If a building's foundation is built on unstable ground, or with faulty materials, the building will not stand for the long term. Reconstruction, often expensive, is needed. Sometimes the completed structure cannot be saved. The human brain is very similar — simple brain circuits and skills provide the scaffolding for more advanced circuits and skills over time. If that basic foundation is missing, a skilled and educated future worker cannot be built.

High quality parent strengthening and early education programs are critical to building healthy brain development in Maine babies and toddlers.

Studies show that young children who experience high quality early care and education are more likely to have good physical-emotional-mental health, have higher self-esteem, have greater speech and language skills, succeed academically and attend college, have higher earnings as adults, own their own homes, and contribute to Maine's tax base.

These are terrific outcomes — out-comes we should strive for with every Maine child.

Students who experience high quality early care and education are less likely to experience emotional and mental health problems, require remedial education, drop out of school, become teen parents, engage in criminal behavior as teens and adults, abuse drugs, and become dependent on welfare.

Failure to invest in high quality early care and education has been costly for Maine. Currently, the state of Maine spends more than \$300 million annually in special education costs, \$800 million annually in substance abuse costs, and \$1.2 billion annually in increased domestic violence costs.

Preventing one child from adopting a life of crime saves taxpayers \$1.7 million.

It's time for Maine state government to focus resources on not just the remedial needs of our children — but strategically investing in prevention programs proved to reduce more healthful outcomes.

The babies of 2008 will be Maine's future workers, our public policy-makers, business and nonprofit leaders and educators in 2030 and beyond. We need to start each of them with the solid foundation needed to help us all build the future Maine wants and so desperately needs. High quality early care and education is vital for our individual and statewide future economic security. It's time we all made the investment.

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