

# EDUCATION WEEK

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## **Early-Education Advocates Face Tougher Sell**

**Economic benefits still remote and intangible, business skeptics warn.**

By **Linda Jacobson**

*Telluride, Colo.*

Supporters of programs in early-childhood development viewed a conference held in this resort town last week as a focused—even groundbreaking—opportunity to refine and strengthen their message that such efforts are a valuable economic investment for the states.

They learned, though, that they face big challenges in persuading more business leaders to buy into the cause of expanding preschool and other services, particularly for children considered at high risk for later academic or social problems. “I can tell you this is not the top topic in any business meeting,” said Phyllis Eisen, a senior vice president of the Manufacturing Institute of the Washington-based National Association of Manufacturers. “Their stockholders aren’t saying, ‘Are you worried about early-childhood education? Do you have a plan?’ ”

Other participants at the Sept. 9-11 conference made frank comments about the struggle of communicating their conviction that high-quality services for young children have an economic benefit, even as a number of state governors have embraced that cause.

### **Seeking New Evidence**

Paul Hirschbiel, the chairman of the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation and the owner of an investment-consulting business, said the public and lawmakers might be tiring of hearing about the return on investment from the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study, begun in Michigan in the 1960s.

The famous study is probably cited more than any other to make the case for expanding preschool programs, because of its finding that participation in such programs is linked to lower rates of crime and higher educational attainment later in life. ("**Research Updates Lives of Perry Preschoolers,**" Nov. 24, 2004.)

"With the data that's out there, [the research available is] starting to feel a little thin," Mr. Hirschbiel said.

And some people at the Telluride conference acknowledged that not all business leaders are interested in a strategy that won't pay off for 20 years or more. For many business executives, current workforce needs are likely to be paramount.

In Connecticut, for example, companies are concerned that baby boomers are retiring and that younger workers are moving out of the state, said Robert W. Santy, the president of the Connecticut Economic Resource Center, which promotes the state as a favorable place to do business.

"We have an immediate workforce need," he said.

### **'Building Human Capital'**

Organizers of the three-day Economic Summit on Early Childhood Investment called it a "Davos forum on building human capital" through spending on early-childhood programs, comparing the event to the annual international gathering of economic and government leaders held in that Alpine village in Switzerland.

Robert H. Dugger, an investment-company manager who leads the Partnership for America's Economic Success—a consortium of business leaders, economists, and philanthropists that sponsored the event here along with the local Telluride Foundation—said the list of participants could be considered "the highest-powered assemblage of talent" to address the subject of preschool and other services for children from disadvantaged families.

Conference-goers heard from state leaders who described their struggles to build legislative support for early-childhood education in the face of tight budgets.

Gov. Kathleen Sebelius, of Kansas, a Democrat, cited a recent study showing that half of all Kansas 5-year-olds were not ready to meet the expectations for kindergarten.

"We can never catch some of those kids up," she said, contending that money spent on K-12 is being wasted because children are not prepared in the early years. "What we need now is the political will."

Colorado Lieutenant Gov. Barbara O'Brien, a Democrat, said that, in her state, few resources are available to whittle down the waiting list for preschool because of annual increases in the state's prison budget.

It was clear that the participants realized that they have a large task ahead of them in making early-childhood services a high national priority.

One measure of the challenge they face: data presented by Eugene Steuerle, a senior fellow at the Washington-based Urban Institute, showing that the share of the federal budget for children's programs is actually expected to decline, largely because of the growing U.S. population of retirees.

Even if funding is in place, states continue to struggle over issues such as which children should be eligible and which providers can participate. ("**States Press Ahead on Preschool Programs**," June 6, 2007.)

But Arthur J. Rolnick, a senior vice president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis and a champion of early-childhood education, described a new initiative in Minnesota that, in his view, shows business leaders are coming to share the belief that spending money on young children now will save government money in the future.

So far, \$15 million has been raised toward a \$30 million pilot program that will provide preschool scholarships and mentoring to low-income families in an area of St. Paul. Mothers in the program will be paired with mentors even before their babies are born, and incentives that encourage parents to send their children to high-quality preschool programs will be built in.

Although the pilot program is being offered in an area of the city not now served by good programs, Mr. Rolnick believes that will change.

"I know how the market works," the economist said. "The market will create the quality."

**'States Are the Key'**

Some speakers cautioned that support from businesses and foundations can go only so far.

“I don’t think this is a private-sector responsibility,” Gov. Sebelius said. “I think this is an American responsibility.”

The Kansas governor also made bold comments about the role she thinks the federal government should play in providing preschool programs, saying Congress should “put resources on the table and then get out of the way.”

Ron Haskin, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank, went even further.

“We’re not going to figure this out at the federal level,” he said, pointing to the confusing mix of programs for children already paid for by the federal government. Among the various programs he displayed on a chart were Head Start and Even Start, child care, and programs involving preschool services for children with disabilities. “The states are really the key to this,” Mr. Haskins said.

Participants at the meeting—which didn’t include the usual audience of early-childhood advocates and researchers—also plan eventually to come up with a list of what they hope will become known as the “Telluride principles” to guide their future work.

And plans are under way to make this an annual meeting, similar to the way other resort towns, such as Aspen, Colo., and Jackson Hole, Wyo., have become gathering spots for influential leaders concerned about policy issues.

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