

July 16, 2009

## Studies show pre-K is vital

By Robert Dugger

### Other Views

If you had the opportunity to invest in a product with a proven ability to increase your sales immediately, establish a foundation for future growth, and bear dividends for decades, would you take it?

Most people wouldn't hesitate to answer yes. Yet, most don't realize we have such an opportunity — right now, and right here in Tennessee.

Evidence from rigorous research, program evaluations and cost-benefit analyses clearly demonstrates that early childhood investments provide high returns, in the short term and over the long run. For example:

Every dollar spent on high-quality pre-kindergarten programs for disadvantaged children creates \$7 to \$9 in future savings to communities and states.

Families participating in a voluntary mentoring program for expectant mothers and fathers saw a 56 percent reduction in babies' hospital visits.

Research shows that disadvantaged children with quality early-learning opportunities have fewer special-education needs in later years and are more likely to graduate from high school, earn more money, and contribute more taxes.

These simple realities have put early childhood investment front and center as an economic development priority among a mounting number of business people here in Tennessee and across the nation.

Recognizing the short- and long-term economic benefits of pre-K, Tennessee's leaders recently voted to protect funding for the state's Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten program by paying for the majority of the program with general funds instead of dwindling lottery reserves. This is a smart move for Tennessee's families that will help support the state's economic recovery.

### Impact on work force

The strength and readiness of our labor force is a key to economic growth and fiscal sustainability. Through new economic analysis and scientific evidence, we are beginning to fully appreciate that experiences from the prenatal period to age 5 are profoundly influential in determining later workplace effectiveness.

During these years, neural connections are forming at a rate of 700 per second, shaping the foundation of every child's later educational, mental, physical, emotional and social development. In fact, by the time you finished reading that last sentence, 3,500 connections were made in one child's brain.

Early childhood experiences occurring during this vital time — both positive and negative — have a real and lasting impact. Some disadvantages can be addressed down the road through remedial education and other intensive programs, but the cost to taxpayers is far greater, and the chances of success are lower than if we invest in and deploy evidence-based early childhood programs now.

Tennessee leaders are to be commended for protecting investments for young children, but the work is not done. The more we invest in high-quality, early childhood programs today, the stronger Tennessee's economic recovery will be.

---

Written by Robert Dugger and originally published in *The Tennessean*, July 16, 2009. Reproduced with permission from Robert Dugger.