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Program is a valuable investment for the state

Today's Topic: Pre-K looks to kids' future

Our View

When someone sees a student having trouble connecting in a college course and concludes our high schools are broken, it's really too late to blame the high schools.

When someone sees a high school student fail and concludes we've got to do something about reading and math in earlier grades, it's really too late to blame those earlier grades.

In fact, the more that is learned about the education of a child, the more research is showing that a child's brain development and learning skills go all the way back to pre-birth through age 5. Pre-kindergarten is the time to start paying close attention to a child's education.

In recent years, this state has seen business leaders draw direct correlations between solid education and a solid work force. Nashville certainly has enjoyed that recognition among businesses, with the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce getting involved in addressing needs in education. The city is fortunate to have that backing.

But what might not be fully registering yet is that a program that attempts to teach fundamental skills to children before they reach kindergarten is a good indicator of what kind of work force a community can expect. It goes back not just to birth, but to pre-birth. So the next time business leaders say they want to "invest" in education, they can be sure they're using the right word, because evidence is showing that pre-K learning can be extrapolated all the way into an improved business performance. And the promise of a good business performance is a sure-fire way of getting the attention of the private sector. Suddenly, getting businesses interested in education is about far more than a nice gesture. It is a genuine investment, not just a slogan to use for public relations purposes.

Tennessee is fortunate that it has an ambitious voluntary pre-K program in place. The state also has some frustration because one of the many victims of the severe budget problems this state has encountered has been the chance to see the pre-K program grow. It certainly has become a disappointment to Gov. Phil Bredesen, who has had high hopes for pre-K. There was one significant victory this year in the legislative budget process when the legislature shifted \$22 million for pre-K into the basic state budget rather than reach into lottery proceeds for that funding. The lottery saw uncharacteristic declines in profits this year.

But it should not go unnoticed that some reservations were expressed, especially among Republicans, when they saw a snapshot of some research that said pre-K didn't deliver. They were ready to pounce, yank support for pre-K and claim the program is nothing more than government-run baby sitting. Doubters are invited to consult with the Partnership for America's Economic Success, a coalition of business leaders, economists and advocates who are exploring the economic impact of investments in early childhood learning. The benefits of those investments are being substantiated. But it really shouldn't take deep research to see the logic in pre-K investments.

This state has much room for improvement in education. It can wring its hands about it, or it can engage children at the earliest ages in ways that will help children excel and make Tennessee a smarter, stronger state.

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