**Are Our Children Worth It?**

If you could invest $1 and receive $13 in return, would you do it? According to Nobel Laureate economist James J. Heckman, quality preschool programs for disadvantaged children can deliver a 13% per year per child return on investment.

Poverty is a key risk factor for younger children and can fundamentally interfere with a child’s readiness to learn. If children do not have proficient reading skills by the third grade, their ability to progress through school and meet grade level expectations diminishes significantly. This is not the case in other industrialized countries that outperform the U.S. on international comparisons of student achievement, such as the Programme for Student Assessment, or PISA, exam. Those countries spend considerably more resources on students with the greatest needs.

The newest research shows that high quality early intervention and prevention programs can produce savings to state and local governments by successfully preparing children for education. They can reduce rates of grade retention and the need for remedial instruction as well as the costs of social services and crime.

The opposite is also true for low-income students who do not have access to high quality early learning programs. They are more likely to drop out of school, never attend college, be arrested for a violent crime or become a teen parent.

Prominent studies of early childhood education have shown average societal rates of return range from 7% to 20% annually. A well-respected cost benefit analysis of more than twenty different studies of preschool programs demonstrated that a quality preschool program can return on average a “profit” to society (economic benefits minus costs) of nearly $30,000 for every child served.

How might that apply in South Dakota? In 2018 there were 983 children who qualified for Head Start programs but were unable attend due to a lack of funding.

Not only can investments in young children reduce societal costs and increase tax revenue, those investments can boost future labor force productivity, a key ingredient of economic growth. The skills employers look for-including ability in math and language, working well in teams, critical thinking, self-motivation and persistence-are shaped during the first few years of life.

A high-quality preschool program also helps parents enter the workforce. Such a program makes it less likely that parents will be absent or less productive because of unreliable childcare arrangements.

The path to success in life is driven by school readiness, the ability to get along with others, academic success and high school graduation. We cannot afford not to invest in these children now. South Dakota needs a state-funded, voluntary preschool program.

We need to be sure that every one of our most vulnerable, neediest children have an opportunity to begin kindergarten school ready, in helping these children we help ourselves.

The choice is simple: we can pay for high quality preschool programs now or pay far more later.

It is imperative that each of us contact our state senator and representatives and encourage them to invest in our children.

Tom Holmes

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