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Childhood investment = economic development

With the country in economic crisis, it is striking that a nationally prominent economic development organization would be focused on early childhood. But in New Orleans earlier this month that's what happened.

The Committee for Economic Development, a national research and economic policy organization comprised of business and educational leaders, hosted a business luncheon called Business Leadership for America's Youngest Citizens: The Economic Promise of Investing in Early Childhood. As Louisiana continues its efforts to stimulate economic prosperity, it is important that we pay attention to what the experts say about how to achieve our economic goals.

Over the past several years, some of the country's leading economic minds have been detailing the economic virtues of investing in young children. James Heckman, a Nobel prize-winning economist at the University of Chicago, says, "As states are under constant pressure to improve the efficient use of ever dwindling financial resources, any investment away from young children can be viewed as a diversion of resources from the most efficient use of those funds."

Economists at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis have stated: "Investment in early childhood development, if properly funded and managed, yields an extraordinary return, far exceeding the return on most public investments. Any proposed economic development list should have early childhood development at the top."

It is not hard to see why it makes great sense to invest in people when they are young. The first three years of life are a time of unprecedented growth in the human life cycle. During this time, infants change from totally dependent newborns to young children able to come and go as they please, understand that they can share thoughts, feelings and intentions with others, and perhaps most importantly, to empathize with others.

In recent years we have learned how critical this time of life is in terms of the developing brain architecture. While supportive and nurturing experiences help build and solidify positive brain architecture, toxic stress from hunger, fear, abuse or an over-stressed parent over-stimulates the production of chemicals in the brain that undermine the developing brain. This is why more than two decades of research has shown that high quality early childhood experiences lead to the closing of achievement gaps, lower crime rates, a decrease in the need for social services, an increase in employment and earnings and a return on investment up to 16 percent.

BrightStart is "Louisiana's Commitment to Young Children" and is a plan to build an early childhood system. This system is focused on the health, mental health, pre-kindergarten and child care, and parenting education and family supports for young children. Through this systemic approach, Louisiana has started to take the needed steps to support our young children. Today, Louisiana is one of only eight states with legislation to provide pre-K for all children, one of only 15 states with a quality rating system for child care centers, and is among the top states in ensuring health coverage for low-income children.

These successes are just the start of the investments and focus that are needed to build a thriving early childhood system. In many states, this drive is being led by the business community because they understand what is needed to ensure a future with sufficient skilled and qualified employees for their businesses to thrive. In other states, the economic development leaders are blazing the trail in support of their young children. Greg Steinhoff, the director of the Missouri Department of Economic Development, recently stated: "If we have more children who are better prepared not only for education, but for life, they are better prepared to enter the work force. And the work force is the No. 1 economic development factor."

Louisiana's competition understands this well and we have seen other Southern states thrive in the past few years while Louisiana has remained stagnant. The most glaring example is in Alabama, where Bob Riley, the Republican governor, has made early childhood education a top priority of his administration.

Nationally, Alabama's pre-K program is ranked No. 1 in quality. In turn, Alabama has thrived, most recently bringing in \$6.8 billion in economic development projects that are expected to create 24,244 new jobs for that state.

The recent meeting of business leaders in New Orleans provides a wonderful opportunity to add early childhood to our economic development agenda. There is no issue that will have a greater impact on the future work force capacity in our state or provide a better return on our investment. The future of Louisiana's economic prosperity depends on a strong start for our young children.

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