

# Maine Voices: Programs for young children important to maintain

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SCARBOROUGH – The crucial importance of investing significant money and time in educating young (pre-kindergarten) children, and in preventing their abuse and neglect, cannot be overestimated.

Three excellent recent articles in the Portland newspapers highlight the convergence of opinion from business and civic leaders, law enforcement personnel and social science researchers on just this point.

- Staff Writer Kelley Bouchard's piece ("Educate kids early to help everyone later, businesses say," Press Herald, April 20) cites the statistic from America's Edge, a national business organization, that only half the under-5-year-old children in Maine are now served by early care and education programs.

Yet, as Maine State Chamber of Commerce President Dana Connors points out, every dollar spent on high-quality early education programs for at-risk children can save \$16 in future costs for remedial education, incarceration and other socially costly outcomes.

- In a "Maine Voices" column in the same day's paper, Lincoln County Sheriff Todd Brackett argues against proposed cuts in funding for home visiting nurse programs.

Although they represent a relatively small investment supported through the Fund for a Healthy Maine, studies have proven that regular nurse visits to at-risk families cut abuse and neglect rates in half.

This in turn reduces the risk that victims will go on to become violent criminals whose incarceration will cost the state far more than paying for prevention. As Mr. Goodwrench used to tell us in the old commercials depicting a grease-covered mechanic crawling out from under a vehicle (which quite obviously lacked his earlier attention), "You can pay me now, or you can pay me later!"

- Former Maine Attorney General Steve Rowe is another influential Maine leader who "gets it" that we should be spending far more than we do on our young children.

His eloquent commentary (Maine Sunday Telegram, April 17) reminds us that neuroscientists speak of "critical periods" when appropriate brain stimulation is essential to building a foundation for all later learning.

The good news in Rowe's own words: "Babies are born ready to learn. Early neural connections occur at warp speed. Learning is faster, easier and more fun than it will ever be again." It follows that spending for programs enriching and protecting children's lives even prior to starting kindergarten yields a far greater "bang for the buck" than investing resources at any other time in their life.

This applies even more powerfully to the human capital we must invest at these critical early stages of development. Rowe is appropriately passionate in reminding all of us that young children need "healthy and knowledgeable parents who read to you, sing to you, hug you, take you interesting places, keep you safe, and tell you you're wonderful."

But there is an ominous downside to this period of rapid early brain development. Early adverse experiences which children may endure before age 3 have a lasting and profoundly malignant impact on their social, emotional, intellectual and physical development.

They handicap young victims in ways that virtually guarantee they will struggle harder educationally, and probably never catch up with their more fortunate peers.

Instead they will likely be among the 50 percent of Maine high school students who never graduate, or never go on with any higher education. Sadly they will not become part of the college-educated, skilled work force that desirable businesses look for when considering relocating in our state.

Moreover, data from long-term research at the University of California at Davis and Kaiser Permanente Health Care System involving thousands of lives have shown a direct and disturbing correlation between so-called “Adverse Childhood Events” and poor future outcomes measured years later.

The greater the number of these (ironically named) “ACE’s” — neglect, physical and sexual abuse, being bullied, witnessing domestic violence, or living with an alcoholic or depressed parent, to name several — the higher the probability of a future path of mental and physical illness, incarceration, low earning potential, and a spectrum of other adverse social outcomes.

Our governor has stated his bias against newspapers, which means he may have missed the messages about just what constitutes a truly meaningful, high-yield long-term investment in our greatest natural resource — our children.

When a growing chorus of voices, including community and business leaders, urges him not to cut funding in ways that are ultimately harmful to Maine’s youngest citizens as well as to our business climate, we can only hope he’s listening.

– *Special to the Press Herald*

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