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Stunning returns from investing in early learning

By Jean Flotin

Island Forum

If someone told you she had a proven way to curb crime, trim welfare rolls, curtail illiteracy, lower school dropout rates, decrease teen pregnancy and reduce child abuse — all while producing a return of \$13 on each dollar spent in the effort — would you be interested? No, it's not too good to be true. These are the actual benefits of early childhood education.

The meteoric mental growth that occurs from birth through the first five years of life amounts to the most concentrated and consequential learning one will ever do. During these first years, up to 85 percent of one's intellect, personality and social abilities are set, laying a foundation that will largely determine whether one's future learning and behavior will be productive or dysfunctional.

What's more, it is a "use it or lose it" proposition. This initial hard-wiring of the brain is virtually impossible to redo later.

And that is precisely why we need to invest aggressively in early childhood education.

Early learning programs are the most cost-effective and productive investments we can make. Prominent economists have concluded that the public's return on investment in early learning far surpasses that of more common economic development strategies, such as relocating businesses, building sports or entertainment venues, or even roads.

Children who get quality educational attention as infants and toddlers arrive at school ready to learn, with far better prospects for graduating from high school, holding a good job, earning livable wages and becoming taxpayers. They are less likely to need remedial classes, engage in negative behavior, or end up in courtrooms and jails, and much more likely to become productive members of the workforce and community. The resulting cost savings and increased tax revenue produces an astounding 1,300 percent return over the life of the child.

Yet a recent survey of kindergarten teachers revealed that in Washington, more than half of new kindergartners lack fundamental cognitive, social, language and emotional capacities — the very foundations of future success.

That's 45,000 more youngsters each year starting out with the deck stacked against them.

There is forward motion, however. Business, philanthropic and government leaders of vision are responding.

Costco, for example, became active in early learning in the 1990s. One early project was their collaboration with Bellevue Community College to develop our Early Learning, Family and Childcare Center, a model program that intermixes quality early learning programs for infants and toddlers with our parent education activities and our early childhood teacher degree and certificate programs, creating a hub of reciprocal enrichment.

Heads of state government and private foundations are making strides, as well, and Gov. Chris Gregoire has stepped up the pace considerably.

Guided by the recommendations of the Washington Learns study, Gregoire focused the state's early learning resources into a new Department of Early Learning. She also led in founding Thrive by Five Washington, an active public/private early learning partnership that includes the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, The Paul Allen Foundation and corporate citizens such as The Boeing Co., and Wells Fargo, among others.

Even more important, Gregoire worked with the Legislature to deliver nearly \$190 million in new state investments in early learning over the next biennium.

But we still have a long way to go. We need all of us to join in the accelerating drive to develop more and better early learning opportunities in Washington. These are the highest-return, lowest-risk investments we can make for our children's futures, and our own.

Jean Flotin is president of Bellevue Community College.