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From Cradle to Success

Posted 9/22/2005 06:00 AM

Studies and experts say early childhood education may increase state economic development.

Story by Jeff Pullin [Email](#) | [Bio](#)

From birth, children begin their never-ending quest for knowledge. From the moment they open their eyes, they begin to explore the world, seeking information and forming ideas.



Photo Credit: JoAnn C. Elmer

Of the thousands of West Virginia children today -- ranging from infancy to age 5 -- many will inherit the state one day. Today's toddlers and preschoolers likely will lead the state into the second half of the century. But according to experts, these children may be pint-sized solutions to enhancing economic development today.

Educators, child experts and state leaders are taking part in a movement to bring more development to the Mountain State. The movement, which involves the state's youngest residents, offers a simple concept: The state may gain more successful children and a stronger work force by improving early childhood education programs.

"Early childhood programs have shown to have many benefits for not only children but for the community, too," said Margie Hale, executive director of The West Virginia KIDS COUNT Fund, a non-profit organization that searches for and promotes early childhood education programs. "We, as a state, need to deepen our awareness to the importance of early education and how it can benefit economic development in West Virginia."

The Research

The benefits of early childhood development in a region may be difficult to see because such investments require a long-term strategy.

"Most people would not automatically link early childhood education with economic development," said West Virginia First Lady Gayle Manchin, who also co-chairs the Intellectual Infrastructure Committee for West Virginia: A Vision Shared. "We now know the link because it is supported by studies and data."

September 26, 2005

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Organizations such as A Vision Shared, KIDS COUNT and The United Way of Central West Virginia are working with the Marshall University Center for Business and Economic Research to examine the benefits of early childhood development programs on the state's economy. Research includes investigating studies conducted in other regions of the United States and focusing on trends in West Virginia.

The findings will be presented Oct. 9-10 at A Vision Shared Forum at the Clay Center for the Arts & Sciences in Charleston. The State Journal was granted exclusive access to the preliminary results of the study, which links early education programs to a stronger state economy.

"This study very clearly shows that the dollars spent on these programs have a higher return than other economic development projects," said Dr. Calvin Kent, vice president of business and economic research at Marshall. "For every dollar spent on early childhood development, we estimate a \$5.20 return."

The Marshall study found that research supports findings that pre-kindergarten programs contribute to economic development in four major ways:

- as a major industry creating jobs and generating incomes;
- creating a more productive and qualified work force;
- serving as a major amenity in attracting new industry; and,
- reducing the cost of crime, welfare and social dependency.

"When people look at the benefits of pre-kindergarten programs, they tend to look at only the benefits to kids," Kent said. "Those statistics are great. There are fewer needs for special education and remedial courses. Children are less likely to repeat a grade. They are more likely to go to college and gain higher-paying jobs. But the added benefit of that is the savings to the community."

The study also indicates early childhood development programs expand the availability and reliability of the labor force by:

- reducing absenteeism due to unavailable child care;
- freeing potential wage earners from single-parent households to enter the work force;
- allowing second wage earners in the household to enter the labor force; and
- improving the mental health of workers, primarily mothers.

"The problem in convincing the public and lawmakers to invest in these programs is that it is a long-term investment," Kent said. "There is always a tendency for people to ask 'what is in it for me?' The majority of these benefits is shown when these kids get into the work force."

Other Studies

West Virginia is not the only state that has studied early childhood development as an economic development indicator. Other regions of the U.S. have investigated the trend, and some of those studies date back to the 1960s.

In May, Minneapolis economists Rob Grunewald and Arthur Rolnick published a report, "A proposal for Achieving High Returns on Energy Childhood Development." Grunewald will speak about the report at the forum in October.



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"We looked at early childhood development programs throughout the United States," he said. "States are seeing anywhere from a 6 percent to an 18 percent return on their investment."

Grunewald said the study looked at other projects, which followed children over a significant period of time, including the Perry Preschool Project in Ypsilanti, Mich., which looked at the effect over 40 years. It is the longest preschool study in history.

"Those who were enrolled in the Perry Project were more likely to graduate on time and do better in the work force than people who were in the control group," he said. "They produced higher tax revenue and were involved in less crime."

Time to Act

In addition to possibly improving the state's efforts of increasing economic development, educators and experts said the time for West Virginia to effectively act on these studies is slowly running out.

"Under legislation passed in 2002, West Virginia counties have to implement a pre-kindergarten program by 2012-2013," Kent said. "We have about seven years to do it right."

With regular cuts in education in state and federal budgets, economists, education leaders and experts agree that early childhood development programs will need the support of non-profits and business in the community.

"Early childhood development programs produce results within 15 to 20 years," Kent said. "On the political front, politicians often can't think beyond the next election. Studies show 50 percent of the funding has to come from the private sector."

Manchin said businesses can take action by supporting local pre-school programs and developing day-care centers in their workplaces.

"Businesses who have day-care centers have better attendance in their work force," she said. "Just look at the mental and physical benefits of it. Workers are healthier and more focused. We don't have to recreate the wheel; business leaders and government leaders need to work together to find ways to building a strong, sustainable program."

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