



Home
Weather
News
Government
Business
Legal
I Team
Travel
Opinions
Special Sections
Article Archive
XML RSS Feed
Extra Features
Featured Links
Slideshows
Postcards
View Events
Submit an Event
Decision Makers
Print Edition
Where to Buy
About Us
Submit a Story Tip
News Philosophy
Staff Bios
Contact Us
Work with Us
Current Openings
Advertise with Us
Sales Overview
Contact Sales
Poll

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Forum to Focus on Early Childhood Development

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

Next month, non-profit, business and government leaders are scheduled to converge on Charleston to find ways to integrate early childhood development with West Virginia's quest for economic development.

West Virginia: A Vision Shared will present the Early Childhood Education and Economic Development Policy Forum Oct. 9-10 at the Clay Center for the Arts & Sciences. First Lady Gayle Manchin will serve as host of the two-day forum, which will feature economists, government leaders and others who have incorporated early childhood development programs in other states.

"The governor has said since his inauguration that economic development will not sit down and plan without education also being at the table," said the first lady, who also is co-chairwoman of the Vision Shared Intellectual Infrastructure Committee. "We hope to find what is early childhood education and how does the business community become involved?"

The forum also will serve as the formal unveiling of a study conducted by the Marshall University Center for Business and Economic Research. The Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation awarded \$150,000 to the United Way of Central West Virginia and Marshall University to study the impact of early childhood education.

"The goal of this study is to demonstrate what early childhood development programs can do for economic development," said Dr. Calvin Kent, Marshall's vice president of business and economic research and leader of the Marshall study. "This study shows that early childhood programs are a long-term investment, and it raises awareness how businesses should play a part."

In addition to the study, organizers will present leaders who they said have been at the forefront of the early childhood development movement. Experts include former North Carolina Gov. James Hunt, who implemented a program called Smart Start in 1993.

"In terms of economic development, our early childhood programs are showing a brighter, more creative work force," Hunt said. "We have seen it in the companies that are coming into our state and are delighted to have better child care. That is one of the concerns many

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companies look for when coming to a state. They look at good child care and good schools."

One of the sponsors of the forum is the West Virginia KIDS COUNT Fund, an organization with the goal of reaching out to at-risk children, such as those from low-income families.

"The community needs to know how they can invest in early childhood development programs," said Margie Hale, executive director of KIDS COUNT. "This hasn't really been discussed because it is a long-term investment. But business leaders know about long-term investment. They know it takes time for programs to become successful and pay off."


The forum is limited to 200 guests, and registration is on a first-come-first-served basis. For information on the Early Childhood Education and Economic Development Policy Forum or to register, visit www.visionshared.com/ECEpolicyforum.

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