

## Charleston Daily Mail

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### **Editorial: Pre-kindergarten as economic boost?**

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In 2002, legislators required all 55 county school systems to educate 4-year-olds by 2012. More than 7,000 children, almost 40 percent of the state's pre-kindergartners, attend voluntary programs now.

This effort to start saving children early cost \$39 million last year, and is projected to cost \$60 million when fully in place. It's an initiative that has won national recognition for its quality.

There's no question that some of the state's children would benefit from that kind of preparation.

But attempting to quantify the value of early childhood education as an economic tool is a bit much.

The Marshall University Center for Business and Economic Research, in a study underwritten by a \$50,000 grant from the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation, asserts that West Virginia would get a 12 percent return on early childhood programs.

The payoff would come in higher graduation rates, more people completing college, higher incomes and better lifestyles, the study said. Children who get good early education pay more taxes, are less likely to go to jail, use drugs, fail a grade or need public welfare.

But, says Margie Hale of the advocacy group Kids Count, people who work in early childhood programs are poorly paid, turnover is high, and only about a third have health insurance. Aides make \$15,000 a year; preschool teachers, an average of \$18,600.

Fixing all that and targeting all 3- and 4-year-olds would cost \$60 million, Hale said. It would take twice that to produce "quality" programs.

But, says the study, the state could get a \$5.20 return for every dollar it invests in such programs.

Yes, the state's economic development programs are often misguided corporate welfare.

But this permutation of the mantra "Education (spending) is the key to economic development," is the most poorly crafted yet.

Of course early childhood education would help children. But to imply that an investment of \$120 million would produce multimillion-dollar returns is ludicrous.

It's hard to take social engineers seriously when they make claims like that.

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