

Early Learning is Good Business

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(Appeared June 9, 2004 in the ***Reston Connection*** as "*Early Learning: Good Business.*")

Last week I attended the most interesting and informative conference I have been to in a very long time. "Early Learning is Good Business: A Summit for Business and Civic Leaders" hosted by Fairfax County Board Chairman Gerry Connelly and sponsored by several County agencies, businesses, and the Freddie Mac Foundation brought together business and community leaders and service providers to explore the returns that come from investments in early childhood programs.

Dr. Mildred Warner of Cornell University presented results of her own research as well as that of others to show the important role child care plays as part of the social infrastructure for economic development. Research indicates that every dollar invested in preschool programs returns \$7 in savings for redemption, welfare payments, unemployment, and other compensatory costs. Dr. Warner argues that early education programs should not be considered welfare or a drag on the economy, but rather should be considered an economic development investment.

Other interesting facts to consider are that 85% of a person's intellect, personality, and social skills are developed by age five, while 95% of public investment occurs after children reach age five. A George Mason University survey found that 70% of police chiefs surveyed said providing more educational child care programs and after school programs are the most effective ways to reduce juvenile violence.

But very importantly, it is not just educators and early childhood advocates who recognize the importance of these programs. The leading national spokesperson for the cause and a speaker at the conference is David Lawrence, Jr., retired publisher of The Miami Herald. The newspaper won five Pulitzer Prizes during Mr. Lawrence's tenure. As President of the Early Childhood Initiative Foundation, Mr. Lawrence has led the successful effort in his home state of Florida to pass a constitutional amendment to provide high-quality pre-K availability to early childhood programs for all 4 year olds beginning in 2005. Calling attention to early childhood concerns "the single most important topic in the country," Mr. Lawrence is a passionate advocate for a movement to recognize that a number of initiatives in early childhood intervention including parenting education, quality child care, and early education, among others, have tremendous returns to a community economically and in quality of life.

It costs more to keep a child in quality care for a year than college tuition costs. We have all kinds of subsidies, loans, and scholarships for colleges, but little for parents for child care.

Taking up the challenge locally will be "Fairfax Futures: The Fund for Early Learning and School Readiness, a non-profit organization which invests in early childhood education so all Fairfax County children enter school well prepared to succeed." Fairfax County has the challenge that 57% of the children age 5 and under live in households where all adults are employed outside the home.

For more information on the research supporting investments in early childhood programs, visit <http://economicdevelopment.cce.cornell.edu>. To join Fairfax Futures in its work by donating time, talents, and resources, visit www.fairfaxfutures.org. And, as usual, if you want to discuss the topic further with me, contact me at kenplum@aol.com.