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Chloe Learey: Early childhood education means business

To those who ask “Why should I pay for someone else’s kid to be in child care?”, I say, “because quality early care and education is a critical part of our economic development now and in the future.”

This is not just a matter of investing in our youngest citizens because it is the right thing to do. Rather, it is a matter of investing in our current workforce. As every working parent knows, the care of young children is a daily concern. Working families who do not have access to affordable early care and education may make the choice to leave the workforce. In a state like Vermont, which has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country, this is especially challenging.

Employers also recognize the impact of child care issues on the performance and the careers of their employees. Parent-employees who can rely on high quality child care are more productive and have greater job satisfaction. Further, these parents have reduced tardiness, absenteeism, as well as lower turnover rates.

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As a state, we are trying to attract talent to the state; young professionals and entrepreneurs who will contribute to Vermont continuing to be a vibrant place to live because of the quality of life and a diverse, exciting economy. Often this demographic has young children, or is planning to start a family. If they cannot find high-quality, affordable care for their children, they are less likely to come here. A strong network of providers will help attract and retain a critical group of people for our workforce. Child care – formal or informal – has become a critical issue for working families. Most child care choices are made based on location, cost, dependability, flexibility and quality. The priority of each characteristic varies with each family’s situation. Simply, child care and early education has become an important option for all parents. And, that impacts economic development.

According to a Cornell University study, “In research spanning forty years, study after study has shown that investments in high quality child care and early childhood education do more than pay significant returns to children and their families. They also benefit taxpayers, profit employers and employees, and enhance economic vitality. When families can rely on quality child care, they are more productive employees, and have reduced rates of absenteeism and turnover. Framing high

quality child care and early childhood education in terms of economic development is a crucial component to economic growth and competitiveness at the national, state and local level.”

In a 2006 policy brief issued by The Brookings Institution, the impact of a high quality universal preschool policy on economic growth was analyzed. The research concluded “that such a policy could add \$2 trillion to annual U.S. GDP by 2080.” By that same time period, the policy brief estimated the cost to the federal government would be approximately \$59 billion. Returns in the form of federal revenue cover the costs several times over. This does not include the indirect effects of a better educated workforce such as an increase in health and nutrition, an increase in civic involvement and a decrease in crime.

Finding care for your child in Windham County is very taxing. Even if you have the financial resources to pay, it can be difficult finding a spot because there is very little vacancy in existing programs. Last month for instance there were two part-time slots for infant care in the service area covered by Windham Child Care Association, which tracks this

data. And the financial and regulatory pressure on existing programs means that some may close, creating an even tighter market. This is not just a problem for families; it is a problem for employers.

With current early childhood education resource levels, too many kindergartners will continue to begin school ill-prepared, language skills and achievement scores in math and reading will likely remain at mediocre levels, costs for interventions during the K-12 years and after will continue to rise, high school graduation rates and postsecondary degree completion rates will likely remain unchanged, and businesses will lack the necessary workforce to fill the jobs of the future.

Children are born ready to learn, with 90 percent of brain development occurring by age 5, before they even enter kindergarten. Early childhood education is not about learning letters and numbers. It is about creating the foundation required to succeed in school and beyond – as a citizen, as an employee, as a parent. This foundation is about social skills and emotional health, skills for learning to play well with others (think “teams), for understanding and regulating your emotions (think “professionalism” or “customer service”), for being organized (think “efficiency” or “productivity”). These are business skills. Whether or not you have children, you will benefit as an employer from a robust early care and learning system. It is investing in the infrastructure of economic development, not “paying for someone else’s child care.”

James Heckman, Nobel laureate in economic sciences, found that “the return to human capital investments are greatest for the young for two reasons:(1) skill begets skill, and (2) younger persons have a longer horizon over which to recoup the fruits of their investments. Interventions later in life, including job training, adult literacy, prisoner rehabilitation, and education programs for disadvantaged adults (although beneficial), yield low economic returns compared to early interventions, such as pre-K programs.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Institute for a Competitive Workforce reported that several studies have shown the return on investment that early learning programs can bring to communities. From the number of people employed to the supports provided to working parents to the long-term benefits for children who attend high-quality programs, early learning policies should be considered with the economic development plans. Investing in early childhood education is not only beneficial for children, families, and society at large but is also good for business.

Editor’s note: This commentary is by Chloe Learey, the executive director of [Winston Prouty Center for Child and Family Development](#) in Brattleboro. She served on the Blue Ribbon Commission on Financing High-Quality, Affordable Child Care.

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