

An Often Overlooked Economic Development Program

As the city of Worcester looks toward revitalizing downtown and enhancing economic development programs, we should not overlook the important contribution of Early Childhood Education to the overall improvement of the local economy. The constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, written by John Adams in 1779, asserted, “a fundamental duty of government is to provide for education.” No one argues the economic benefits derived from a highly educated workforce. However, when assessing the investments in education that yield the highest public returns, the important role of Early Childhood Education is often disregarded.

While most children benefit from high quality early childhood education experiences, children from low-income families show the most significant gains across many domains. Not only are these children provided with the building blocks for academic success, they also show large gains in social-emotional development, which is critical for long-term success. According to the National League of Cities, without early intervention, children living in poverty are more likely to experience poor health, score lower on standardized tests, be retained in grade, drop out of school, have out-of-wedlock births and end up as poor adults than rich or middle class children. A child born to a poor mother is more likely to die before his or her first birthday than a child born to an unmarried mother, a mother who smoked during pregnancy or a mother who is a high school dropout. Even within the same family, children born when the family’s financial condition was worse, tend to complete less schooling than their brothers and sisters who were born during more financially stable times.

Several highly regarded research studies examining the role of Early Childhood Education clearly demonstrate the importance of and economic benefit of investing in early learning. The High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, The Syracuse Preschool Program, and the Abecedarian Project all demonstrated higher academic achievement and increased IQ scores in children participating in high-quality early childhood education programs that also provided parent education and home visiting. The economic benefit of these programs was realized in both the short and long term. These children were much less likely to be placed in special education, more likely to graduate from high school and less likely to drop out. In addition, program participants were less likely to be involved in juvenile and adult crime. In fact, the results of the Syracuse Preschool Program demonstrated that after 10 years, program participants were 70 per cent less likely to be involved with the criminal justice system. The incidence of teen pregnancy among participants was significantly less. Program participants were far less likely to rely on welfare benefits and on average earned \$2000 or more per month as adults than their peers who did not have the advantage of a high quality early education experience.

Worcester has a compelling need to look at the economic impact of early childhood education in the community. According to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health 46.1% of births to Worcester residents in 2000 were paid by public funds. This is up from 36% of public pay births to Worcester residents in 1990. Almost half of our young children were born into poverty. Without support during the critical early years,

these children will require special education, juvenile justice intervention and welfare assistance in the future. The cost to the community will be enormous.

The benefit-cost analysis conducted by the High/Scope Perry researchers found that for every \$1 invested in the program, over \$8.00 in benefits was returned to participants and society as a whole through less reliance on welfare programs, less special education expenditures and lower criminal justice expenses. A recent review of early childhood education research conducted by the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis contends that the internal rate of return is in fact, a 12 to 1 ratio. Few economic development projects can boast this high a benefit to the community.

Worcester points with pride to our outstanding number and caliber of institutions of higher education. Unfortunately, according to Census 2000, only 23.3 percent of the population has a bachelor's degree or higher. Public investment in early childhood which will prepare our youngest citizens for academic and life success, can lead to a higher percentage of college educated citizens and a better educated workforce.