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ALABAMA VOICES: Investing sooner wiser

By Gail B. Piggott

Today at the McWane Science Center in Birmingham, The Alabama Partnership for Children and the Alabama School Readiness Alliance are partnering with the Business Council of Alabama and the Alabama Chamber of Commerce Association to host a first-ever Business Leader Summit on Early Childhood Investment. Our state's business leaders will meet to hear from national experts and state leaders about the investments we can make now that will pay huge dividends in the future.

A mounting body of research points to the earliest investments in healthy development of our children as the most promising way to turn the curve on several issues that make the news regularly. We must ensure that children enter school healthy and ready to succeed.

When children enter kindergarten behind, they most often stay behind and the gap widens. If we are concerned about the growing number who drop out without a diploma, we need to make sure every child enters with a chance to succeed. Our nation's premier economists -- not educators or social scientists -- tell us that the best way to improve our schools is to improve the students sent to them.

Our agency's mission is that every Alabama child has the opportunity to succeed in life - regardless of where they are born, where they attend school, or who their parents are. We have learned much in the past decade about what types of experiences level the playing field and prevent the achievement gap that is prevalent across much of our state.

First, strong families who are supported in extended networks are absolutely critical -- nothing we can do will supplant a strong, protective family that cherishes children and nourishes their optimum development. One support is access to preventive health care and medical homes so that minor health issues do not become costly lifetime challenges. The relatively small investment in children's health insurance pays huge dividends.

What was once thought of as a necessary support for working families with young children is actually a fertile ground for improving educational outcomes -- the beginning of the education pipeline. With more than 60 percent of young children's parents in the workforce, a majority of our children spend some part of each day in care outside the home. If this is high quality care, it can actually level the playing field - laying the foundation for entering school ready to succeed.

Yet, in our state, there is no reliable way for parents to determine which programs provide this educational foundation. Our top quality First Class pre-K program is for four-year-olds and serves less than 7 percent of our children.

The leadership of the Business Council of Alabama and the Chamber of Commerce Association, representing thousands of business leaders across the state, will be critical for us to make our case that an ounce of prevention is really worth a pound of cure.

Gail B. Piggott is executive director of the Alabama Partnership for Children.