



## **Early childhood education: Aiding kids early reaps profits later**

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By Gail B. Piggott

A mounting body of research points to the earliest investments in healthy development of our children as the most promising way to turn the corner on several issues that make the news regularly. If we want to ensure a productive work force, we must ensure children enter school healthy and ready to succeed because when children enter kindergarten behind, they most often stay behind, and the gap widens.

On Thursday at McWane Science Center, 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.

With support from Pew Charitable Trusts and the Partnership for America's Economic Success, our state's business leaders will meet to hear how the investments we can make now will pay huge dividends in the future.

Currently, too many of our young children are born into poverty, most often to a single mother with limited education, and this only feeds the cycle of poverty. For many of our children, the tremendous opportunity during the most critical years of development (from birth to age 3) is lost to family instability, poor child-care options, erratic and emergency-style health care, and all too often, abuse and neglect that predetermine outcomes that eventually are a drain on our state's economy.

Our agency's mission is that every Alabama child has the opportunity to succeed in life -- regardless of where he is born, where he attends school, or who his parents are.

Strong families 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. Access to preventive health care is imperative so that minor health issues do not become costly lifetime challenges.

Also, 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 work force, a majority of our children spend some part of each day in care outside the home. And, if this is high-quality care, it can actually level the playing field -- laying the foundation for entering school ready to succeed. Few investments

create such a win-win-win: Working families have access to child care, young children get the experiences and foundation for future success, schools and employers get the human capital to move our education system and our economy forward. 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 for 4-year-olds serves less than 7 percent of our children. There are now more unlicensed child-care programs than are licensed. Less than 8 percent are accredited. So, many parents who pay a lot for child care (on average more than college tuition) don't have an accurate measure of the quality of the program. Implementing a rating system is truly the best way to make sure our public and private investments support programs that actually prepare children for school success.

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. The state summit will be a chance for us to learn what we need to know, hear about what has proven to work, and determine how we move our state to the place where we accept the responsibility for paying a little now so that we don't continue to pay more later. It's just good business sense.

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**[www.smartstartalabama.org](http://www.smartstartalabama.org)**

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