

Early childhood programs improve future workforce

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by J. Alex Valdez

Eighty percent of New Mexico's fourth-graders are reading below proficiency, ranking New Mexico 49th of the 50 states. We have to say: "This is unacceptable, period!" This is but one of the fourth-grade reading score statistics presented in the recent Kids Count Special Report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

I cannot imagine what more we need to drive home the point that as a community, a state and a country we must recognize our children as our best investment and begin to demand quality early education and development programs. Early childhood development programs are rarely portrayed as economic-development or workforce-development initiatives, and I think that is a mistake. Such programs, if they appear at all on the economic development list for state and local governments, appear at the bottom. They should be at the top. Most of the numerous projects and initiatives that state and local governments fund in the name of creating new private businesses and new jobs result in few public benefits compared to well-focused investments in early childhood development that yield high public and private returns.

The quality of life for a child, and the contributions the child makes to society as an adult, can be traced back to the experiences of the first few years of life. From birth until 5 years old, a child undergoes tremendous growth and change. If this period of life includes support for growth in cognition, language, motor skills, adaptive skills and social-emotional functioning, the child is much more likely to succeed in school and later contribute to society.

Leading economists Art Rolnick and Rob Grunewald have examined research on early childhood education and have concluded that the economic returns from early education programs were better than from any other public investment. In New Mexico, where we have limited economic resources, I hope we make the best use of the dollars we do have by investing in the lives of our children.

Any proposed economic development list for Santa Fe should have early childhood development at the top. The return on investment from early childhood development is extraordinary, resulting in better working public schools, more and better educated workers, and less crime.

At Christus St. Vincent Regional Medical Center we welcomed 1,600 new babies into the world last year. It is a sad fact that the majority of these beautiful children will enter first grade already behind because they lack early literacy skills. If they are not reading at grade level by fourth grade they will likely never catch up.

My years in public health have taught me that you want to always move upstream. You want to always get to a place where you are preventing issues from occurring later on by intervening early enough to make a difference. If we don't look at the task of improving high school graduation rates through an early childhood lens, then much of our subsequent effort will be Band-Aids only.

Having a well-educated, well-trained labor force with the best of analytical and thinking skills could

not be more critical for the workplace, Christus St. Vincent and ultimately the economic health of our whole community. Those 1,600 babies are our business leaders, our teachers and our doctors and nurses of tomorrow. Join me in advocating to our legislators for robust early childhood development programs. The economic future of our people and our state depends on our active voices. Contact the New Mexico Early Childhood Development Partnership at www.nmecdp.org for more information.

49th out of 50 is unacceptable!

J. Alex Valdez is CEO of Christus St. Vincent Regional Medical Center. He lives in Santa Fe.