

Kansas Governor Kathleen Sebelius' Testimony to the Joint Economic Committee

Wednesday, June 27, 2007

Senator Casey, Congresswoman Maloney, members of the committee, I appreciate the opportunity to visit with you today about the importance of early childhood education to our children's success and our nation's long-term prosperity.

All Americans know the power of education to change lives and expand opportunities. That's why the guarantee of a quality public education has always been such an integral part of our nation's promise to its young people, and why we're seeing states making significant new commitments to K-12 schools.

Kansas, for example, is dedicating \$1 billion in new resources over four years to our K-12 schools in order to ensure every child, in every school receives a quality education. And we've undertaken audits to ensure these new resources are spent efficiently, as well.

But too many children are entering school without the basic skills they need to succeed in kindergarten and beyond. This problem was brought home to Kansas policymakers by a recent survey which revealed that less than half of children start kindergarten fully ready to learn. This "achievement gap" affects children of all backgrounds, but most often holds back poor and minority children.

Ninety percent of a child's brain development occurs before the age of five, and children who attend early childhood programs are far more likely to enter kindergarten ready to learn, more likely to read at an appropriate grade level and more likely to go on to graduate from high school. That's why education during the early years crucial in helping children acquire the tools and skills they need to succeed in kindergarten and beyond.

But children who start off school behind their peers are more likely stay behind throughout their school lives and into adulthood, meaning they never reach their full potential. This costs states money in terms of spending on remedial classes and programs, which are less effective and cost-efficient than early learning efforts.

There are social costs as well, especially in reduced wages for workers who aren't ultimately as successful as they would have been had they been able to take advantage of the full opportunities of their education. The cost of not continuing education beyond high school alone is immense, with the Census Bureau reporting a college graduate is expected to earn roughly \$1 million more over a lifetime than someone with only a high school diploma.

For every dollar we invest in early childhood education, studies show we can save upwards of seven future dollars – perhaps much more – by having fewer juvenile offenders in our prisons, fewer Americans on public assistance, fewer teen pregnancies and a workforce more nimble and prepared for an ever changing world. One study estimated an investment in early childhood

education could raise the GDP by half of a percent by 2050, while saving \$155 billion in costs from crime and social problems.

Other studies that have tracked students over long periods of time, such as the Connecticut Longitudinal Study, show that children who receive instruction from an early age do better in school and in life than those who do not. That study focused specifically on reading, and showed that problems learning to read at an early age lasted throughout their school lives. Additionally, these students were more likely to become teen parents and three times as likely to be unemployed than students without similar reading issues.

What this tells us is that we can help lift children up and expand their opportunities through investments in early learning which close the achievement gap that currently keeps too many children from achieving their full potential.

This isn't just an issue in Kansas – it's a national problem, one that requires a national commitment to early learning efforts such as pre-K.

That commitment is unfortunately lacking. Currently, Head Start is only serving five out of every 10 eligible children, while Early Head Start is serving only three out of every 100 eligible children. Huge numbers of children are being left out, yet while the reason cited for this lack of commitment is budgetary, we end up paying more down the road when the children who are left behind need remedial education, additional job training or worse.

In the absence of a full federal commitment, the states are taking it upon themselves to invest in early childhood education. This year, 29 governors proposed increased investments in pre-K and other early learning programs. This is 11 more than the previous year, with the total investment of these proposals exceeding \$800 million and providing early learning opportunities to more than 100,000 three- and four-year-olds.

These proposals show the building momentum for a national commitment to early education, and I'm proud to say that Kansas is one of the states that increased its commitment to young children this year, just as we've done over the past several years.

We started in 1999 by devoting Kansas' share of the tobacco settlement to children's programs, specifically early childhood education. Smart Start grants have been given to communities for a wide range programs focused on the well-being of children from birth to age five, with \$8.4 million of these grants expected to be made this year alone.

These efforts were continued and enhanced when I took office. For the first time, we brought stakeholders together in what had previously been a disconnected and disjointed system of Head Start programs, child care centers, home care and school-based efforts.

Previously, there was little if any interaction between these groups. No one had talked to each other, there were no common standards and little cooperation. We now have a clear goal and a group of stakeholders in the public and private sectors, including key business leaders, who are the driving force behind expansion of early learning.

In 2006, this coalition won a victory when Kansas legislators supported my recommendation to increase funding for early childhood education, including the creation of pre-K pilot projects around our state. In six of our largest counties we funded early learning classrooms where children received instruction and guidance from trained, qualified specialists.

Due to the success of these projects, the effort was expanded in 2007 through an additional investment of \$3 million, bringing the total to \$5 million, and we expect upwards of 600 children to receive an opportunity to close that achievement gap and start off school at or above grade level – an opportunity they likely wouldn't have otherwise had.

But as I said before, this pre-K effort is not an isolated program – it is part of a broad based approach to early childhood education, one supported by business leaders and educators alike.

As the culmination of a two-year planning process, we've created the Kansas Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems plan. This plan was developed using the stakeholders we brought together several years ago and is based on the best practices that have been shown to improve community, school and family influences on a child's school readiness.

This strategic plan gives us a road map for the expansion of early childhood learning efforts over the next three years. Its first year focuses on pre-K – which we're addressing in part through the pilot projects. The plan calls for the expansion of access, the development of curriculum-based programs and an increase in professional standards, items all stakeholders agree on.

It also calls for the creation of a quality rating system for childcare, so parents can feel confident their child is receiving instruction from a qualified early learning professional, and an education campaign to inform parents about the importance of school readiness.

And while it isn't usually thought of as part of early learning, our strategic plan also calls for every child in Kansas from birth to age five to have health care. There is a clear connection between the health of a child in her early years and the success of that child later in life. Insuring every child would allow them access to cost-effective preventative care that will help keep children healthy and in school, rather than sick and at home or in a hospital.

These coordinated efforts will have significant and lasting benefits in Kansas, just as similar efforts can have a positive impact on our nation.

That's why I'm heartened to see an interest on the part of Congress in making a national commitment to early learning. States are making progress, but we can't do it alone.

As Senator Casey's "Prepare All Kids Act of 2007" points out, "State-funded preschool is the most rapidly expanding segment of the United States educational system, but in many States a lack of stable funding poses an enormous threat to the provision or continuation of high quality preschool." Many of the states that don't offer early learning opportunities have populations that would benefit from it the most, which is why the targeting of help to low-income communities – as is done in the proposed bill and in Kansas – is critical to closing the achievement gap.

The proposed legislation demonstrates an understanding of one of the challenges of offering high quality preschool opportunities – professional development. Teaching three- and four-year-olds is different than teaching older children. They have specific needs and there are specific ways that teachers can help their minds grow. But this requires special training, which we're seeking to ensure in Kansas, just as this bill would promote nationwide.

I'm also pleased to see the bill includes requirements for pre-kindergarten teachers, but would add my hope that Congress does not create another unfunded mandate. Many states do not currently have the educational programs in place to help early childhood educators become better providers, which is why the aforementioned support for professional development is so important.

I do want to point out that early childhood programs, particularly pre-K, cross traditional agency boundaries. Our state's Department of Commerce, Department of Education and social services agencies are all involved in a collaborative effort in this area, and I want to make sure Congress recognizes the cooperation that is required to effectively provide early learning opportunities.

It's important that any legislation promotes community-based programs as well as school-based efforts, just as we've done in Kansas. This is again because pre-K isn't just an education issue, but a social, health and economic issue as well. The costs borne across the spectrum that result from a lack of quality early learning opportunities can just as easily become benefits, but only if we have a coordinated approach to the issue.

Finally, one aspect that is missing from this proposal is parental involvement to the degree we're seeking in Kansas. There needs to be an education effort to inform parents on the importance of early learning. But more importantly, parents need to know that the program they've chosen for their child is staffed by qualified teachers and has an appropriate curriculum. Parents need to have the peace of mind that comes from knowing their child is in a learning environment that will help her develop the knowledge and skills needed in school and life. We're doing that in Kansas through a quality rating system and I would recommend looking at a similar system for programs supported through federal grants.

Yet above all, while federal funding for early childhood programs developed by the states would help expand early learning, there are several non-monetary principles agreed upon by Kansas parents, educators, social service providers and early learning advocates that should be followed by any federal effort.

Any comprehensive early childhood program should ensure all children have health insurance and access to medical providers.

Each early childhood care and education system should coordinate all birth to five efforts across the education, social services and advocacy spectrum, and mental health and social-emotional development must be fully integrated into the system, as well.

Parents should have access to the resources they need and should be well informed about issues of childhood health, development, and education.

And finally, any early childhood system should strengthen families to help them develop and utilize both intellectual and material resources to prepare their children for school and life.

Young people face a range of challenges, but education has the remarkable ability to arm them with the knowledge and skills needed to overcome these challenges. A federal commitment to early childhood education will give countless young Americans the start they need to succeed in school and in life. It pays dividends far in excess of the cost, by reducing the need for remedial programs, increasing worker productivity, and reducing the number of young people who turn to crime and those who see their horizons limited by poor choices and abandoned dreams.

I again appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today to reinforce the importance of making a national commitment to early learning, not just for the sake of our children, but for the sake of our nation's long-term prosperity.

Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to working with you to expand early learning opportunities throughout the nation so that we can close the achievement gap and create a brighter future for us all.