

Our children need a 'Smart Start'

Sunday, September 28, 2008

GAIL B. PIGGOTT

I was privileged recently to represent partners across Alabama who work every day on behalf of our youngest and most vulnerable citizens - children from birth to 5 years old.

The occasion was Step Up for Kids, where advocates across the country gathered at the Capitol in Montgomery in an event coordinated by Every Child Matters and VOICES for Alabama's Children.

As leaders to step up:

The central message I offered was that in Alabama, of all the investments we make in a child's life, we invest the least during their most critical developmental years - before they ever enter school. Without question, this is the time in a child's life when there is greatest potential for impact, so why would we not ask our leaders to step up and make key investments here when the return on investment potential is maximized?

Many of us are concerned about crime in our communities and in the alarming school dropout rates, and we are challenged to invest in proven strategies to change these trends.

Research tells us the opportunity for changing our future comes much earlier than elementary or middle school. It is during the first five years of life when the foundation is laid for future health and success in school and life.

That's the mission of the Alabama Partnership for Children - to ensure a "Smart Start" for every Alabama child. Sixty thousand babies are born each year in Alabama, and they will quickly pass through the most critical developmental years. At no other time in their lives is there such potential for building the strong minds and bodies necessary for future success. That is why early investments in strong families who nurture and protect children and have access to high-quality early learning options are wise - returning many dollars in improved outcomes for every dollar invested. In fact, our nation's top economists tell us if we want better child outcomes and if we want to improve our schools, we must improve the children sent to them.

The national initiative "Fight Crime, Invest in Kids" reports that in Alabama, 4 in 10 students fail to graduate from high school, and that these dropouts are 3½ times more likely than graduates to be arrested and more than eight times more likely to be incarcerated. They will also earn less, pay fewer taxes and are more likely to collect welfare - making this an important economic issue also. In fact, when students drop out of school, almost every door to a good future closes.

There are many programs intended to improve graduation rates, but the most tested and proven school reform shown to greatly increase graduation rates is access to high-quality preschool programs. Two long-term evaluations show that high-quality preschool increases high school graduation rates by as much as 44 percent, because most of the achievement gap we find at third grade is present at school entry. Dropouts may physically leave school when they are 16 or 17, but far too many have effectively dropped out by grades 3 and 4, a result of entering school ill-prepared and meeting with early failure that is difficult to surmount. By all measures, we know it is far more effective and cost-efficient to build a healthy child who is ready and eager to learn than to remediate him in elementary school or to rehabilitate a troubled teenager or young adult.

The good news:

The good news in Alabama is that we have begun to step up with the expansion of the state's First Class Pre-K program, only one of two in the country that rank a perfect "10" in quality standards, such as having degreed teachers with specialized training in early childhood. This quality rating is important, because just putting young children in programs does not bring the improved results - programs must be high quality. Another important aspect of First Class Pre-K is the effort to build on existing programs, supporting quality enhancement, thus making scarce dollars go further and strengthening existing child care and Head Start programs. These programs are a necessary support for working families, if we are to sustain our record-low unemployment rates.

The Alabama Partnership for Children has stepped up with others to form the Alabama School Readiness Alliance to bring attention and resources to the need to expand high-quality preschool so it is available to every 4-year-old whose parents want it. And, the Alabama Partnership for Children also provides a scholarship program to support early childhood teachers in getting their college degrees - necessary if we want to expand the number of high-quality programs in our communities.

We should all be concerned about the economic and social costs that result from the trend of too many young people entering prison and too few entering college or the work force. But, we also have an opportunity to step up and advocate for a proven way to reverse these trends. Gail B. Piggott is executive director for Alabama Partnership for Children. E-mail: gpiggott@smartstartalabama.org. For more information on the Alabama Partnership for Children and the Alabama School Readiness Alliance and how you can step up and help make a difference in Alabama, call 866-711-4025 (For Zero To Five) or go to www.alabamaschoolreadiness.org.