

Cut crime: Invest in Alabama's pre-K plan

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Studies show a link between kids' skills and later problems

Alabama's voluntary pre-kindergarten program is paying big dividends, but not just to the 4-year-olds enrolled. In recent years, business groups have heralded the state's pre-k program as an important way to improve the overall economy, raise earnings and generate wealth.

Meanwhile, teachers and other education professionals show a direct correlation between early learning and success in school.

Now a new, unlikely ally of pre-k has come forward. The anti-crime organization Fight Crime: Invest in Alabama's Kids has released a study called "School or the Streets: Crime and Alabama's Dropout Crisis."

Surprising solution

Endorsed by more than 70 law enforcement officials and crime victims in Alabama, this study connects the dots between crime and the high school dropout rate and offers a surprising solution: high quality pre-k.

Nearly four out of every 10 teenagers will drop out high school before graduating. Dropouts are three and one-half times more likely than high school graduates to be arrested, and more than eight times as likely to be incarcerated.

Most of Alabama's inmates have never received a high school diploma. According to researchers at the University of California at Berkeley, as a state's graduation rates improve, murders and assaults are reduced.

Increasing Alabama's graduation rates from an estimated 61 percent to 71 percent could prevent more than 75 murders and 2,100 aggravated assaults in a year in our state.

This doesn't sound like an aggressive crime fighting policy. But law enforcement officials say that a child who struggles in the back of the kindergarten classroom is more likely to find himself as a young adult struggling on the side of a police car. Studies show that kids who are successful in school and graduate are more likely to become productive citizens, and less likely to turn to crime.

Investing in effective pre-k programs can get children off to a good start and keep them on track. High quality pre-k permits a disadvantaged child to begin elementary school on par academically and socially with their more advantaged classmates.

Research shows that when starting on a level playing field, children tend to remain there. When children start behind, they stay behind and drop out.

Numbers triple

This year, Alabama's pre-k program will serve triple the number of 4-year-olds it served just two years ago. Recognized nationally, the program meets all 10 standards for quality from the National Institute for Early Education Research.

However, there is much work to do. We need additional funding to allow more children to take advantage of high quality pre-k. We also need to get the word out so more pre-schools, daycare centers and public schools will apply for funding.

Right now, too many Alabama 4-year olds are not enrolled in a high quality pre-k program that will prepare them for school. Improving these numbers can translate to better chances for children, higher graduation rates and safer streets for all of us.

Linda Tilly is the executive director of VOICES for Alabama's Children. VOICES is a statewide multi-issue nonprofit organization whose mission is to improve the lives of Alabama's children. Established in 1992, VOICES for Alabama's Children was the first, and remains the only, organization to document the conditions of children in each of the state's 67 counties. For more information or to join visit www.alvoices.org