

## **The Birmingham News**

### **KIDS COUNT ALABAMA: State cannot abandon early learning**

**By Kristin Bailey September 09, 2007 2:00 AM**

Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, "We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future."

Early learning and preparation for our children is not a new concept. Yet, as more research emerges, we better understand the necessity and importance of an early investment in our youths and its benefits to our society and economy. Alabama's future depends on it. According to research, the first five years of a child's life will determine, in great measure, the child's capacity to learn, adaptability in society and emotional and psychological stability. This is the crucial time when preparation for life must occur.



As a state, we must ask ourselves three questions: How can a high-quality prekindergarten program affect a child's well-being and benefit a state's communities and overall economy? Are we taking the appropriate steps to provide our children early learning opportunities, such as high-quality pre-K, so in turn, we prepare them for the future? What are the consequences for all Alabama citizens if we do not?

Some of the answers to these questions are reflected in the 2007 Alabama Kids Count Data Book, which is to be released by VOICES for Alabama's Children on Tuesday and uses 19 measures to evaluate child well-being on a county-by-county basis.

Are we taking steps to ensure our children are ready for the future? Alabama's state-funded pre-K programs received a 10 out of 10 rating for quality from the National Institute for Early Education Research in its "State of Preschool: 2006 State Preschool Yearbook." But this same study also recognized Alabama ranked last in the number of children receiving this program.

The good news is on June 7, Gov. Bob Riley signed the state's Education Trust Fund budget into law, which included \$11.7 million for early education. The education budget more than doubles state funding for high-quality prekindergarten programs. The additional funding is a giant step in the right direction for our children. Yet, it is not only our children who will benefit from a high-quality pre-K education, but also society in general.

In congressional testimony in June, Kansas Gov. Kathleen Sebelius described pre-K's effects on society by saying, "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 work force more nimble and prepared for an ever-changing world."

All of society can benefit from less crime and safer communities. In the Data Book, one of the reported measures is juvenile violent crime arrest rate. Research has shown that children who attend high-quality pre-K programs are significantly less likely to commit violent crimes or ever be sentenced to prison.

Teen pregnancy is another issue that has high costs to society and, in turn, is linked to other social issues -- poverty and income, overall child well-being, health issues (such as low birth weight), education, child welfare and risky behaviors. Studies show that high-quality pre-K education can reduce the likelihood of teen pregnancy by as much as 74 percent.

When thinking about the future of a state and weighing societal costs, we must also look at the benefits to the economy. Due to Alabama's economic growth, there will likely be more high-paying jobs in the future.

Most people understand the power of education in obtaining good-paying, highly competitive jobs. In the Data Book, education indicators such as first-grade retention rate, dropout rate and projected dropout rate all measure education potential, and also highly correlate to later success in life.

There is no single answer to the many questions of how to best prepare young people for the future. Pre-K is one piece of the puzzle of school readiness, and school readiness is one piece of the child well-being puzzle. Yet, by looking at the societal and economic benefits of early learning, the real question is not whether we, as Alabamians, can afford to support early education opportunities for our children. It is whether we can afford not to.

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