

Expect to See Sizable Returns

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Lately there has been a lot of talk about early childhood education and discussions about the long-term economic and workforce benefits that result from it. Virginians are demonstrating increased concern for our youngest citizens and the realization that there are real, positive outcomes when you create opportunity.

Raise your hand if you have ever listened to the song, "Teach Your Children," by the musical group, Crosby, Stills, and Nash. While this song is open to several interpretations, one message that strikes a chord is that it is every generation's responsibility to look after those who share our world.

Simply, we all benefit when we help do what is right for one another. Providing every child with an opportunity to be healthy, educated, and successful in life is the right thing to do. We all know this of course, but the difference between knowing what needs to be done and actually doing it is often large. At times we need to focus on the why -- and recognize that we are not alone in our efforts.

THE LATEST scientific data conclude that more than 85 percent of a child's brain network is wired in the first five years of life. Environmental and health factors, combined with early learning experiences, determine children's lifelong ability to learn, to relate to others, to be productive in the workplace, and to be fully engaged citizens. The greatest opportunity to be a positive force in their lives falls within this small window.

In addition, economic research from a variety of evaluations and studies by the Federal Reserve Bank state that public investments in early care and education draw returns of up to \$18 for every dollar invested. This is just one reason why our fellow citizens and leaders are stepping up to the plate.

The chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank is citing the positive economic impact of investments in early care and education, and both the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate have held national summits to present the facts to our elected leaders who are now considering national policies that could positively impact generations of Americans. The light has turned on again in our national consciousness and a new movement to improve our nation is underway.

HERE AT HOME in Virginia, we are aligning our early childhood systems, while agencies and organizations are working collaboratively to implement a comprehensive plan to improve early care and education across the commonwealth. As a whole, we call these efforts Smart Beginnings, focusing on children from birth to age 5. But these efforts will need continued support to be effective.

As the new president of the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation, I have been encouraged by the collaborative, bipartisan support I have witnessed to increase school readiness in Virginia. And, over the past several months, the foundation, a public-private partnership, has awarded more than \$2.4 million in grants to local communities.

With sustainable public and private support, we can provide leadership to foster Smart Beginnings for all young children in Virginia, and through them a vital future for the commonwealth and our nation. Virginia: "Teach your children well."

Scott Hippert is the president of the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation.