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Investing in Early Childhood: Failing Our Four-Year-Olds

Budget cuts force Michigan preschools to turn away kids

Jo Johnson knows first-hand the benefits of preschool.

“I think any child that doesn’t have preschool is not ready for kindergarten,” the Kalamazoo mom said. “I can prepare my child for learning at home, but I can’t teach my child how to interact with children if he’s not around them. [Justin] loves coming here. He’s always proud. You can definitely see in the kids that they’re proud of what they’re doing. It gives them a lot of self-confidence.”

Kindergarten teachers agree. On average, 35 percent of approximately 150,000 Michigan children entering kindergarten each year – nearly 50,000 children – are not ready to learn, and their teachers attribute the lack of preschool as a primary factor. Low-income students who don’t have the advantages afforded to children of more educated parents are the most at-risk for school failure if they cannot attend a preschool program.

That’s why Michigan’s Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP) is so important to children and the future of Michigan, which depends on a skilled and educated workforce to fuel its economic turnaround. GSRP, Michigan’s state-funded preschool program for at-risk and low-income four-year-olds, serves more than 25,000 students each year. But almost 5,000 additional youngsters were turned away this year after lawmakers cut \$7.6 million in GSRP funding from the current fiscal year budget.

“We are grateful for the level of funding that has been maintained, but we also know that we could be funding the program even better to reach more children in need,” said Kellye Wood, director of the Pre-Kindergarten Early Education Program (PEEP) within Kalamazoo Public Schools. “When children come to sign up for PEEP, they are already planning on coming to preschool. They walk in saying things like ‘I’m this many, and I’m going to school.’ They march right in telling us about their backpack and telling us they’re going to ride the big yellow bus. There’s nothing more sad than not being able to give that child a spot.”

GSRP funds must be restored and redirected

Advocates, including Michigan’s Children, are seeking a restoration of GSRP funds in the proposed budget for FY 2011 as well as the removal of language allowing school districts to redirect GSRP funds for other purposes. This year alone, an estimated 2,400 preschool spots were eliminated when districts decided to use the funds to offset other cuts. That number could increase as districts look to fill ongoing budget gaps.

Failing to invest in programs such as GSRP makes it even more difficult for children to catch up later, when remediation is more expensive for taxpayers. An estimated 11 percent of Michigan students repeat kindergarten at a cost of \$100 million a year to the state. A recent study from the Wilder Research Institute of St. Paul, Minn. reported that Michigan saved \$1.1 billion in 2009 alone due to

investments made in the state's school readiness efforts over the past 25 years. And nearly 9 of every 10 kindergarten teachers report that the time needed to work with students who are academically behind when entering schools has an impact on their ability to teach the rest of the students.

In addition, preschool optimizes the huge learning period when 90 percent of a child's emotional and intellectual brain wiring is set for life before age 5.

Preschool “launches children into orbit”

Jo Johnson was fortunate enough to secure a spot for her son Justin in PEEP, which currently enrolls 324 students. Wood said many more were turned away due to insufficient funding.

Johnson knew she wanted Justin to attend the program after seeing how valuable it was for her older son, Michael who had little interaction with children his own age until he attended preschool. Johnson worried her son's social skills would be stunted, or his limited exposure to books would stymie his vocabulary, limiting his ability to understand and communicate, or that he would be so overwhelmed in kindergarten that learning would be limited.

Now 9, Michael is a happy, successful fourth-grader who is reading beyond his grade level. Little brother Justin comes home from preschool beaming with pride at his latest accomplishment, and loves to go to school, just like his big brother. Next year, when Justin walks into his first day of kindergarten, he will know how school works and have positive memories of his time in the classroom, as well as a solid background of social and academic lessons.

Parents are included in the child's learning process, a key to school success. In addition to bringing parents into the classroom to volunteer, PEEP teachers make at least two home visits each year.

In the classroom, teachers use topics of interest to young children such as firefighters or caterpillars to teach children about language, reading, writing, science and math, as well as intangible skills such as how to listen to a teacher and how to interact with other children. Behaviors like being quiet when others are talking and following a schedule are expected in kindergarten and the GSRP program prepares children for situations they will face later in life.

“We're helping to reinforce positive behaviors for school,” PEEP teacher Lynn Weller said. “It also gives them more time to grow in a safe environment that's consistent and nurturing everyday. They have time to feel good about themselves and to see themselves as learners.”

The benefits of GSRP are numerous, especially for low-income children whose parents often can't afford tuition-based preschool.

“We have children that come to us who don't have books in their homes,” said Sue Chartier, principal of Northeastern Elementary in Kalamazoo. “They don't even know how a book is held. It's detrimental to the children, academically and socially, if they're not in a preschool program.

“There's something really magical about this one year of preschool, and it's really not so magical because we've been able to identify what it is about preschool that puts a child at a higher trajectory. If you think of preschool as a launching pad, it launches children into orbit in a good way, and it multiplies every year.”

Questions and Answers about GSRP

Q: What is the Issue?

A: GSRP funding is allocated to both school districts and competitive community-based programs. In the current fiscal year, 50 percent of the competitive funding was cut, a reduction of \$7.6 million dollars, resulting in the loss of 2,200 spots. In addition, in response to cuts in per pupil payments to

local school districts, lawmakers gave districts flexibility this year to redirect GSRP funds to other district needs. It is estimated that 10 percent of the school district GSRP funding, \$8.1 million, was redirected, leaving another 2,400 students without access to an early education.

Since Michigan's economy and fiscal status began to decline in 2001, many critical services for children have been reduced. Michigan is not alone in facing these challenges. Yet, many states have struggled to maintain funding for early education because they appreciate the competitive economic advantage it offers. A recent study showed that 27 of 38 states with state-funded preschool programs maintained or increased funding in their 2010 budgets. Michigan was one of ten states that reduced funding, failing to "put proven programs ahead of politics."

Q: What is the GSRP?

A: GSRP is Michigan's state-funded preschool program for at-risk and low-income four-year-olds. The program, which began in 1986, is designed to prepare educationally disadvantaged students for kindergarten and later school achievement. Currently, the program provides per-pupil funding of \$3,400 to eligible districts, Intermediate Schools Districts or community agencies. The services provided to eligible children include an age-appropriate curriculum, nutritional services, health screenings, referral services for parents to community social services, and plans for parental involvement.

At least three-quarters of the children enrolled must be from families with incomes below 300 percent of poverty. Children who are extremely low income, below 200 percent of poverty, qualify if they are not eligible for Head Start. Children in families with incomes between 200 and 300 percent of poverty must have additional risk factors in addition to income to qualify for the program.

Additional risk factors include diagnosed disabilities or developmental delays, severe or challenging behaviors leading to expulsion from preschool or child care, a primary home language other than English, parents with low education levels, a history of abuse or neglect, homelessness, or being born to a single or teen parent.

Q: How many children are affected?

A: Approximately 25,000 low-income or at-risk four-year-olds participate in GSRP programs each year. As a result of budget cuts to the competitive program, and the reallocation of funds to other district needs, at least 4,600 GSRP spots have been eliminated this year. Even before cuts were made, an estimated 35,000 Michigan children were eligible for state- or federally-funded preschool programs but unable to access them.¹

Q: Why are state investments in GSRP so important?

A: The importance of early childhood and early learning is well known and unassailable.² Neuroscientists have shown that children's earliest years of life alter the architecture of their brains in ways that can permanently affect learning and development. By the time a child is five years old, as much as 90 percent of his or her intellectual and emotional brain wiring has been set for life. Positive and intellectually challenging experiences early in a child's life spur neuron connections that determine intelligence and behavior. If a child's earliest experiences include poverty, deprivation or stress, the brain fails to grow at its optimum rate.

Social scientists and economists have also documented through four decades of research and evaluation that early investments have both short- and long-term payoffs for children, communities

¹ Chase, R., Anton, P., Diaz, J., MartinRogers, N., and Rausch, E. Cost Savings Analysis of School Readiness in Michigan (November, 2009). Wilder Research, St. Paul, MN.

² Investing in Young Children: The First Step on the Path to Economic Prosperity in Michigan. (January 30, 2010). Early Childhood Investment Corporation and Michigan's Children.

and taxpayers, including improvements in school achievement, and taxpayer savings resulting from reductions in costs related to special education, crime, substance abuse and reliance on public services.

Q: Does preschool really matter?

A: Yes! Research confirms that children who participate in the GSRP are better prepared when they enter school, and continue doing better years later.

Michigan kindergarten teachers report that more than one-third of all children are entering school unprepared, in part because they haven't had access to high quality early learning experiences. Their lack of preparation for kindergarten affects *all* children: Nearly 9 of every 10 teachers say that the time needed to work with children who aren't ready to learn detracts from the time they are able to give to other students.³

In studies by the High Scope Educational Research Foundation, Michigan elementary school teachers reported that MSRP graduates were more ready to learn than their fellow students who did not benefit from the program. In addition:

- Fewer MSRP graduates were held back a grade through 4th grade, saving the taxpayers an estimated \$11 million each year in the costs of retention, and lower grade retention rates were found for MSRP students through middle school.
- MSRP graduates performed better on 4th grade MEAP tests, with 24 percent more passing the MEAP literacy test, and 16 percent more passing the math test.⁴

Q: Is preschool cost-effective?

A: Yes! Investments in early education can generate savings that more than repay their cost, and that produce returns for schools, state government, taxpayers and the public.

A recent study by Wilder Research Institute found that Michigan saved \$1.1 billion in 2009 alone as a result of investments made in early childhood over the past 25 years. The savings include reduced spending on students repeating grades, special education and teacher turnover, reduced governmental spending on social issues, and reduced tangible losses to crime victims and health savings due to reduced drug and alcohol use.

The biggest loss to the state is the reduced economic output that results from a less educated workforce. Overall, increased earnings and taxes that can be attributed to early education programs and related school success exceed program costs by up to \$4 for every dollar invested.⁵ In addition, High Scope research confirms that for every \$1 spent on high quality early childhood care and education for low-income children, the state saves as much as \$17 on welfare, criminal justice, special education and other social service expenses.⁶

Q: What do voters think?

A: Michigan voters overwhelmingly support investments in early childhood education. A 2009 poll of Michigan voters showed that 83 percent view early childhood development and education programs as absolute necessities for their communities. The majority also favor making the funding investments necessary to ensure that all children arrive at school ready to learn — even if it increases their taxes.

³ Michigan Kindergarten Teacher Opinion Survey: Key Findings. (August 2009). Early Childhood Investment Corporation, Lansing, MI.

⁴ Malofeeva, E., Daniel-Echolds, M., and Xiang, Z. Findings from the Michigan School Readiness Program 6 to 8 Follow Up Study. (October, 2007). High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, Ypsilanti, MI.

⁵ Chase, R., Anton, P., Diaz, J., MartinRogers, N., and Rausch, E. Cost Savings Analysis of School Readiness in Michigan (November, 2009). Wilder Research, St. Paul, MN.

⁶ What Does Economics Tell us About Early Childhood Policy? Research Brief, Rand Corporation (2008).

Further, a majority of voters would cast their vote based on a candidate's position on early childhood investments.⁷

Q: What can lawmakers do to improve investments in early learning?

A: Michigan's Children is calling on state lawmakers to:

1. Restore funding for the GSRP competitive program to the fiscal year 2009 level, an increase of \$7.6 million. The GSRP competitive program was cut by 50 percent in the current fiscal year.
2. Support language in the School Aid budget that was proposed by Gov. Granholm and endorsed by the House of Representatives, requiring school districts to protect funding for the GSRP by removing the flexibility to redirect those funds to other district budget priorities.

Michigan's Children is very concerned about the underfunding of Michigan's public schools. However, given the solid research connecting early learning to later school achievement, we believe that it is counterproductive to attempt to solve the problem of underfunded schools by cutting funds for preschool programs.

Q: What can parents and community leaders do to support GSRP?

A: Michigan's Children encourages parents and other community leaders to contact their legislators and urge them to (1) restore funding for the GSRP competitive program, and (2) adopt budget language that protects early childhood programs by requiring districts to use GSRP funds for early childhood education services.

For contact information, go to www.michiganschildren.org/index.php/Get-Involved/Legislative-Contacts.html

To cut and paste an email message to legislators, go to www.michiganschildren.org/index.php/Action-Alerts/

See GSRP in action in a short video at www.youtube.com/michiganschildren

This is the second of a five-part series of Issues for Michigan's Children: Investing in Early Childhood reports. Each month leading to the state's August primary election, this series will examine an issue affecting young children ages 0-5 in Michigan. The Issue for Michigan's Children: Investing in Early Childhood series is part of an effort to elevate the visibility of early childhood issues in the state budget process and 2010 elections as we work to prioritize investments in early childhood when the foundation is set for a lifetime of learning. For more about this project, visit www.michiganschildren.org and click on the Early Childhood Action Network.

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⁷ Research conducted for the Early Childhood Investment Corporation by Lake Research Partners (June 25, 2009).