

By Sentinel Editorial Board

Print Page

March 29, 2015 2:01AM

Our View: Early childhood programs among best investments

One of the most encouraging signs on the political landscape in Lansing in the past couple of years has been the growing recognition that it's cheaper to deal with social problems by preventing them before they occur than once they're persistent and entrenched.

Always the numbers guy, Gov. Rick Snyder has increased funding for the state's Great Start Readiness preschool program by \$130 million, recognizing that getting more kids prepared for school will save money by reducing the need for later interventions. And in his proposed 2015-16 budget, the governor includes a broad-ranging \$48 million initiative to improve third-grade reading skills, considered a key predictor of future academic performance. Yet not everyone's on board with that kind of investment for the future — when a state House appropriations subcommittee approved its education budget last week, it included no funds for the third-grade reading initiative.

In our view, it's only common sense to prioritize government spending to head off problems early, the way we encourage people to get physical exams before major illnesses develop. The governor's reading initiative includes interventions that begin as early as birth — more home visits, more parent coaching and early assessments of child development problems, as well as in-school strategies such as more teacher training and more instructional hours. Some critics have called the early intervention programs intrusive, but we see them as supportive for the people who really need them — economically struggling families, often isolated from the supportive extended families that were once the norm in America.

Last week, a coalition of organizations concerned with early childhood development met with The Sentinel's editorial board to endorse Gov. Snyder's initiative and support other early childhood programs. (While backing the third-grade reading initiative, the coalition is taking no position on holding back third-graders who don't meet standards, an option in a proposed reading bill sponsored by state Rep. Amanda Price, R-Park Township.) They pitched specific programs, such as Early On, a program offered through intermediate school districts that provides home visits, intervention and therapy for babies and toddlers with developmental delays. They cited numerous statistics and studies on the consequences when a child falls behind early in life — Patrick Moran, president of the Greater Ottawa County United Way noted that the achievement gaps between children who enter school ready to learn and those who don't narrow once they enter the classroom, but actually widen.

Along with established child-welfare organizations and social-service agencies, the coalition includes representatives from the business sector, the faith community and, interesting to us, law enforcement and even the military. Allegan County Sheriff Blaine Koops, representing the group Fight Crime Invest in Kids, noted that fewer than 5 percent of the inmates in his jail have a high school diploma and that 50 percent of them can look forward to seeing their own children incarcerated. Fighting crime by getting kids off to a good start educationally, he said, is a far more efficient way to fight crime than locking up adult offenders. Retired U.S. Army Major General Gerald Miller, from the organization Mission: Readiness, went so far as to call the deficiencies that emerge in early childhood a "threat to national security," noting that seven in 10 Americans between 17 and 24 are ineligible to serve in the military, usually because they have a criminal record, are overweight or lack a high school diploma or GED.

We can't judge the value of every early childhood program out there. What we can endorse is the idea that we should try to leverage budget dollars so they can have the greatest effect, and that often means directing them at the youngest members of society.

Thankfully, many people in state government do recognize that. Just days after that House subcommittee froze out funding for the governor's third-grade reading plan, a Senate subcommittee handling K-12 education appropriations looked at the amount of money the governor had set aside for third-grade reading in its budget pot, and doubled it.