

Early childhood education is not a game

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Family game night at our house isn't complete without Jenga, the game with 54 wooden blocks. Once they're stacked, the object is to pull out one of the lower blocks and carefully place it on top without toppling the tower. It takes a discerning eye, a steady hand, and a bent for structural engineering. The sound of defeat on game night is Jenga blocks tumbling to the table.

The sound of defeat for economic growth and prosperity in Durham County, and across our state, is the building blocks of early childhood education crashing to the floor of the General Assembly. The Republican majority's proposed spending plan pulls out the blocks labeled Smart Start and More at Four with a careless hand and no thought to the long-term impact. This is not a game, and we cannot afford to pick up the pieces.

Quality learning environments for young children, birth to 5, are not a luxury. Child care is not an extravagance. In the harshest economic times we need to invest soundly and use every penny wisely for the immediate goal of more parents being able to work, and for the longer range goal of growing the next generation of productive tax payers and winners in the global marketplace. The average working parent misses five to nine days of work per year because of child-care problems, costing U.S. businesses \$3 billion a year in lost productivity. High-quality child care improves productivity, days on the job and retention. Ask our local business owners if they can afford inefficiency, absenteeism and turnover.

Smart Start and More at Four work. Research shows that economically disadvantaged children who are exposed to high-quality early learning environments prior to entering kindergarten perform better in math and reading than their economically disadvantaged peers who did not have this opportunity. These increased achievement levels persist with lasting benefits into the elementary school years. For children with limited English proficiency, the gains are even greater. Children do not grow up in programs; they are raised in communities. Durham's Partnership for Children is locally governed by our community's most experienced leaders. An extensive team of collaborative partners over many years has created an effective network of services that give children and families what they need, and advance a stable economy. These building blocks are the foundation of a strong county, an industrious state and a successful nation.

Come to the table and use your astute eye, your judicious hand and your common sense to protect the structure that many people have built together. Let our General Assembly know that you support Gov. Beverly Perdue's fair and balanced proposed budget, which recommends reducing early childhood programs by only 5 percent. Let our General Assembly know that if they start playing Jenga with our children and our workforce, you are not willing to pick up the pieces or pay the price tomorrow for their reckless actions today.

Laura Benson is an ordained United Methodist minister and the executive director of Durham's Partnership for Children.