

FORUM

High-quality care is critical for Durham

BY MARSHA BASLOE

Guest columnist

The traditional school year has begun and kindergarten teachers across Durham County have already started their assessments of the region's tiniest learners. Within days, these teachers will be



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able to pinpoint which students have been in high-quality child care environments and which students have not had this exposure prior to their kindergarten experience.

Not every child has the opportunity for valuable pre-kindergarten environments. Even with financial support from subsidies and scholarships, significant resources are needed to provide all young children a high-quality early learning experience.

In fact, to assess the early childhood resources needed, the state has a formula developed by

Smart Start at the request of the legislature that looks at the "financial need" in North Carolina for serving children from birth to age 5.

Durham needed \$96 million for young children this year — however, Durham County receives a much smaller allotment of funds. Smart Start provides approximately \$7 million and More at Four provides \$2 million.

Given these limited dollars, it is important that we continue to build a high-quality system that uses our resources wisely and receives a strong return on investment.

We know from a large body of research that high-quality child care produces positive outcomes for young children, particularly for low-income children. Commitment to building a high-quality system is critical to providing our youngest and most at-risk children with the best start in life.

Nobel Prize-winner James J. Heckman, an economist, supports investing in early child-

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President and founder of the Children's Defense Fund

hood education and says that science confirms that quality child care is essential to our economic development.

As Heckman states, "Early learning begets later learning and early success breeds later success."

Not only does quality child care attract business to Durham and encourage the region's skilled workforce, but it also enables economic success down the road by helping to prepare young children for opportunities in the future.

Preparing these young minds begins early. According to Jack Shonkoff of the Center of the Developing Child at Harvard University, babies are born "wired" to learn. From the time of conception to the first day of kindergarten, a

child's development rapidly progresses at a pace exceeding that of any subsequent stage of life. High-quality early learning experiences during the infant and toddler years lay the foundation for school success. These learning experiences support early competence in language and cognitive development, cooperation with adults, and the ability to initiate and sustain positive exchanges with peers.

Marian Wright Edelman recently wrote about the challenges for our children today. What she said is so important, I want to share her words:

"The greatest threat to America's national security comes from no enemy without but from our failure to protect,

invest in, and educate all of our children who make up all of our futures. Every 11 seconds of every school day a high school student drops out of school; every 32 seconds a baby is born into poverty; every 41 seconds a child is confirmed abused or neglected; every 42 seconds a baby is born without health insurance; every minute a baby is born to a teen mother; every minute a baby is born at low birth weight; every three hours a child or teen is killed by a firearm. A majority of children in all racial and income groups cannot read or do math at grade level in 4th, 8th or 12th grade. Over 80 percent of black and Hispanic children cannot read or compute at grade level. These numbers are a

moral travesty and an impending national disaster requiring priority attention at the highest level of decision making.

"If the foundation of your house is crumbling, you don't say you cannot afford to fix it. Children are the foundation of America's future. We need to invest now in their health, early childhood development, and education."

Edelman's words need to resonate here in Durham.

Our community's goal must be that next year, kindergarten teachers across the county can see that all children have received a high-quality early learning opportunity. This is the Year of the Young Child — as the school year starts, we need to remember that early learning begins at birth. We need to invest now to build our future.

Marsha Basloe is the executive director of Durham's Partnership for Children and will soon serve as executive director of the New York State Early Care & Learning Council in Albany, N.Y.