

[The payoff from early education](#)

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“Early childhood education has a tremendous impact on the national economic security and the viability of the American dream.”

These are the words of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce – not typically known for speaking on behalf of children’s issues.

Yet business leaders and economists are becoming some of the best advocates for young children. They know early childhood investments are critical to keeping the United States competitive in a global market. After all, their future workers are today’s newborn babies. Building a strong and productive labor force largely depends on how well we baby-proof the economy today.

Just as parents baby-proof the top of the stairs to prevent a dangerous fall, policymakers must protect the economy from making a major misstep. Investments in early childhood education are the economic equivalent to investments in gates for stairs and covers for electrical outlets.

So what does economic baby-proofing look like? It starts with investing in high-quality early childhood programs. Science has shown that early experiences have biological consequences. . .

For instance, these experiences shape the brain’s wiring, determining whether a child’s brain architecture will provide a strong or weak foundation for all future learning. In addition, brains, like houses, are built from the bottom up. You can’t put the second story on until you have built the foundation. This is why remediation is less effective and more costly than providing what children need to thrive from the get-go. Simply put, the building blocks for learning are well established before a child enters kindergarten.

The Chamber’s new report, “Ready, Set, Go! Why Business Should Support Early Childhood Education,” addresses these essential building blocks. It recommends that states support hiring qualified and effective early childhood educators, integrate early learning and care systems for children from birth to age 5, develop seamless transitions from the early childhood education system to the K-12 system and increase the availability of high-quality programs that support working parents.

Fortunately, beginning with the leadership of Gov. Jim Hunt in the early 1990s, North Carolina has led the way in early childhood. With Smart Start, North Carolina became the first in the nation to create a statewide early childhood system. It was one of the first to create a statewide high-quality pre-kindergarten program. And it was the first to develop a Quality Rating and Improvement Systems – the star-rated license. All are national models. The Chamber report highlights North Carolina’s work as one of five promising practices included in the report.

The bad news is that even as the state's population of children birth to age 5 increases, funding for early childhood programs like Smart Start has been declining for the past decade. The consequences are magnified further as the percentage of children living in poverty also has increased significantly. The most recent census data found that almost a quarter of all North Carolina children are living in poverty. These are the very children that benefit most from high-quality early childhood programs.

Cutting effective early childhood programs hurts all of us. Our future depends on ensuring that today's children are tomorrow's successful and productive adults. We will be relying on them as our next generation of leaders, workers, parents and taxpayers.

But there are short-term benefits as well. 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. Such public investments also help attract new business. In addition, many child care programs are small businesses, and together they employ thousands of North Carolinians.

The Chamber's report concludes with an ominous warning:

"With current early childhood education resource levels, too many kindergarteners will continue to begin school ill-prepared, language skills and achievement scores in math and reading will likely remain at mediocre levels, costs for interventions during the K-12 years and after will continue to rise, high school graduation rates and postsecondary degree completion rates will likely remain unchanged, and businesses will lack the necessary workforce to fill the jobs of the future."

Let's be sure we baby-proof the economy to prevent such a tragedy from taking place.