

OPINION

OTHER VOICES

Let's include 'early' in early childhood

BY KARINE STALLINGS

Guest columnist

This letter is in response to Keith Upchurch's article, "Leaders urge support for early learning bill" covering Monday's joint press conference by Durham Police Chief Jose Lopez, Durham County Sheriff Worth Hill and Hillsborough Chief Clarence Birkhead.

As a child advocate who works to build awareness for the importance of early care and education programming for Durham County's youngest children age birth to 5, I was absolutely elated to hear our area's public safety leaders show collective support for "Fight Crime: Invest in Kids" work to urge for early learning funding for our nation, our state and our community.

I attended the event and was impressed that our leaders understood the long-term consequences of failing to invest in young children today means spending millions upon millions of dollars more in intervention programs, remedial education and prisons 10 to 18 years later.

However, when our public safety leaders cited good community programs, they mentioned youth and school-age programs, not early childhood programs.

There are many wonderful examples of our early childhood efforts in Durham. We support nearly 20 programs aimed at the 24,000 Durham County young children birth to age 5 and their families, such

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as the Exchange Clubs' Family Center's Early Childhood Outreach Program, or programs that help provide scholarships for child care, provide parent education support and prepare at-risk children for kindergarten.

For 15 years, Durham's Partnership for Children has worked to increase child care quality, develop early childhood programs for families, administer the More at Four Pre-Kindergarten Program to more than 400 at-risk 4-year-olds, and ensure better access to medical services for young children and their families.

Today, we have \$3 million fewer dollars and 6,000 more children birth to age 5 in our county than we did 10 years ago. We're encouraged to see Durham County and the City of Durham support early childhood programs.

But let's be mindful that putting a face on these programs is imperative when we talk about the importance of investing in children during the early years to boost graduation rates, reduce crime and build a strong future workforce for Durham.

Karine Stallings is community development manager of Durham's Partnership for Children.