

J. Barry Griswell Testimony for the hearing of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee (HELP) titled “ESEA Reauthorization: Early Childhood Education” on May 25th, 2010 at 2:00 PM in Room 430 of the Dirksen Senate Office Building

Introduction

As an individual who has had nearly 40 years in business, including 8 years as the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, I have had the experience of evaluating many, many investment opportunities. I have found that when one goes looking for investments with reliable predictability of consistently high returns, none of us can go wrong with an investment in early childhood development. I came upon this reality quite serendipitously.

Early Local United Way Experience

In 2002, shortly after becoming CEO at Principal, I had the good fortune to serve as chair of the United Way of Central Iowa, and as part of the experience, I became aware of United Way efforts to build a comprehensive early childhood initiative for central Iowa. In conjunction with this effort a group of women associated with United Way of Central Iowa developed a comprehensive business plan for early childhood development to increase the quality of care being provided by care centers in central Iowa, and led a fundraising effort to raise the level of quality of care being provided in 15 specific centers around Des Moines. The effort focused on those with a minimum of centers and home providers whose children in their care are 85 percent subsidized by the state of Iowa. The goal of working with the centers and home providers was to provide incentives and resources to move them up the continuum of a quality rating system that aims to raise quality of care in the areas of:

- professional development
- health and safety
- environment
- family and community partnership
- leadership and administration

It was through this that I began to learn about the powerful research around brain development in the first five years, and how early reading rates translate into predictors for future school performance, graduation rates, and even incarceration rates. I learned things like:

- By age three, roughly 85% of the brain's core structure is developed.
- The first five (and particularly the first two) years of life are critical to a child's lifelong development. During the first years of life, the brain develops most rapidly, establishing neural connections that form the brain's hardwiring. These years are not only important to language and cognitive development, they are also critical to social and emotional development – the ability to form attachments and to deal with challenges and stress. (“Seven Things Policy Makers Need To Know About School Readiness” Charles Bruner, PhD, January 2005)
- Increasing the graduation rate 1% can cause a societal savings of \$1.8 billion each year, solely from reduction of crime.
- From Art Rolnick, Ph.D. and Rob Grunewald of the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank: Persuasive economic research indicates that there is a very promising approach to economic development that has been long overlooked. It rests not on a strategy of state and local governments offering public subsidies to attract private companies from other communities. It rests, rather, on government support of something much closer to home – quite literally: our youngest children. This research shows that by investing in early childhood development (referring to investments from prenatal to age 5), state and local governments can reap extraordinarily high economic returns: benefits that are low-risk and long-lived.

United Way of America

When I served on the board of United Way of America, I began to see these issues from an even larger perspective. For example, I was made aware of the Abecedarian Project, a carefully controlled scientific study of the potential benefits of early childhood education for poor children. Children from low-income families received full-time, high-quality educational intervention in a childcare setting from infancy through age 5, and progress was monitored over time with follow-up studies conducted at ages 12, 15 and 21. The young adult findings demonstrate that important, long-lasting benefits were associated with the early childhood program.

Several years ago, the United Way of American launched the Born Learning program to raise national awareness of the importance of early brain development in the first five years of life. Today, virtually every local United Way has a focus on early childhood learning.

Business Roundtable/Iowa Business Council

Increasingly over the last decade, various business organizations have thoroughly embraced this issue. For example, in 2003, The Business Roundtable and Corporate Voices for Working Families joined forces to issue *Early Childhood Education: A Call to Action from the Business Community*, which cited findings on a solid return on investment of from \$4 to \$7 for every \$1 spent on quality early childhood education.

At the same time, the Iowa Business Council has had early childhood education as one of its top priorities for at least the past six years. The Council worked with Governors Vilsack and Culver to get signed into law House file 877 – a bill to expand access to quality preschool to nearly every four-year-old in the state of Iowa. According to the groundbreaking Economic Policy Institute report, for every dollar spent in Iowa on universal, quality preschool, by 2050 the state would receive \$8.40 back due to decreased spending on other state programs, higher pay for individuals and savings from reduced crime.

Vilsack Administration and Progress Made

During his terms as Iowa Governor, Tom Vilsack pursued an agenda dedicated to the principles of opportunity, responsibility, and security. He is recognized as an innovator on children's issues and education, economic and healthcare policy, and efforts to make government more efficient and accessible. Iowa is known for its strong K-12 education system in part due to Vilsack's initiatives. He developed aggressive early childhood programs, reduced class sizes, created a first-in-the-nation salary initiative to improve teacher quality and student achievement, and enacted a more rigorous high school curriculum. His leadership also led to Iowa becoming a national leader in health insurance coverage, with more than 90 percent of children covered.

Governor Vilsack created the Iowa Community College Early Childhood Education Alliance to serve as an advocate to deliver state-wide quality education and to facilitate the sharing of "best education practices" in a united and seamless manner benefiting Iowa's economy, families and children.

Principal Child Development Center

Having become a strong believer in the need for high quality child care, I worked with my company to build the Principal Child Development Center, a state-of-the-art facility created to offer high-quality care and education for the children of employees of the Principal Financial Group.

The center serves children from age six weeks through pre-kindergarten. Children of all ages benefit from the high-quality, age-appropriate curriculum, including one that is preschool specific and designed to prepare children for success in school. The curriculum encourages learning through child-initiated activities. It incorporates an emphasis on global, environmental and health and wellness themes, while respecting and valuing diversity. In addition, all children have the opportunity to participate in a variety of enrichment programs that introduce them to the fine arts and physical education while supporting and engaging various community businesses and individuals. As a bonus, environmentally-friendly practices are incorporated into the operation of the LEED-certified center.

Conclusion

I remain convinced that investing in early childhood education is one of the very best investments we can make, whether it be as individuals, communities, states, or indeed the federal government. It would certainly be easier to make such investments when financial times are thought to be good. The harsh reality is that in difficult times, there is greater need and an even greater sense of urgency to make the investment to insure that every child has the opportunity to enter kindergarten ready to learn and develop.