

Economist: A successful child needs investment

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Creating a successful workforce starts by investing in children before they are 5 by supplementing resources of disadvantaged families, according to Nobel Laureate economist James Heckman.

In a time of shrinking budgets, massive cuts and inequality in services, Heckman argued the way to make true change is to invest in character early in a child's life. By age 3, gaps in achievement and understanding are set. Statistically, Heckman said, those remain throughout education. To make effective change, the United States needs to start talking about prevention rather than remediation. Basically, he said focusing on building children who have successful social-emotional skills, cognitive skills and are in good health allows for success in the future. Heckman's argument was part of a talk entitled "Building a Productive Workforce and Strong Economy from Birth" made via live stream from Monterey to 28 First 5 groups meeting throughout California, including First 5 San Mateo which gathered along with community leaders at the College of San Mateo Theater Thursday for the event.

"Families teach children many things in forming character and important life skills. What we need is more understanding that the base of skills needed for success are more successfully formed before children have entered school," said Heckman, a professor at the University of Chicago.

California has been making cuts to education for years. Heckman's argument was that education in kindergarten and beyond isn't the problem. Instead, the issues are apparent once a child is 3 years old. Children who are parents of college educated women, for example, have a greater vocabulary than their counterparts who are children of high school graduates. Often, government deals with such issues with remedial programs like tutoring in school or job training for dropouts. Heckman instead says society will see a greater return from offering supplemental resources for disadvantaged families.

Children who are given encouragement, offered health care and coaching opportunities flourish. That's not offered to all children, he said. Doing so would create a better workforce and individuals who create a better society. While there is an increase in education, Heckman said it's not just about raising test scores.

California's budget has been particularly difficult in recent years. Early education is often on the chopping block. This year, Gov. Jerry Brown's budget proposal for 2012-13 includes eliminating transitional kindergarten, an additional year of kindergarten that was to be offered for children turning 5 later in the school year. The proposed cut will keep them from the preparation. In addition, the state is proposing reducing funding to child-care spots further reducing options for low-income families.

Across the state, many educational leaders have spoken out against cutting the transitional kindergarten program. Early education advocates argue the proposed cut would be a step back in the effort to better prepare children for school. Preschool California estimates cutting funds could delay access to education for 125,000 California students.

Ted Lempert, president of Oakland-based nonprofit Children Now and a member of the San Mateo County Board of Education, explained the key is getting the community to understand success of children is part of a larger package that includes health, early education and child care. Cutting one and keeping the other, he explained, simply will not work.

“There is no smarter investment than early education,” he said.

Other than funding, Lempert is also concerned about shifting early education to local control. The idea is a welcomed one down the road, but currently there are no quality requirements for early education. Such benchmarks need to be in place prior to moving the control to local agencies, he said, adding that creating such measures could take at least a couple years.

Lempert urged people to sign up for the Children Movement, a way to quantify the support for education in a way that can create legislators to back educational opportunities.

Local officials on hand were supportive of investing in children from birth to 5 years old.

San Mateo County Supervisor Don Horsley noted most of the individuals in jail are illiterate.

“Where does that come from? Not having the opportunities starting at 0 to 5. Everyone wants their student to be successful. Maybe they don’t have the tools,” said Horsley, who said those tools need to be offered.

Assemblyman Jerry Hill, D-San Mateo, said the proposed cuts make it look like California is “abandoning a generation.”

Investing in children, Hill said, “always [creates] an improvement to our society in many ways, not just today but in the future.”

Assemblyman Rich Gordon, D-Menlo Park, said it is important for adults to work together to stand up for children.

“Preschoolers never come to talk to me in the capitol. And so, others need to do it for them. We all want our children to succeed; there’s no question about that. We know how important, critical it is to have children growing into maturity that is positive and productive. And we all know the consequences when children don’t have that opportunity,” said Gordon. “And we also clearly now understand the value of early brain development and what clearly happens in those early years. And we know if children don’t enter kindergarten prepared, they are always going to be behind.”

Preparing those children requires others to work together, he said adding it is “imperative” that this work be done.

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