

# The Pueblo Chieftain

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**Today's preschoolers will become your best employees in 2025**

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**EARLY**



COURTESY PHOTO A young finger painter is busy at work in school.

## **CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

By **BARBARA O'BRIEN**

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*Barbara O'Brien is lieutenant governor of Colorado.*

We learn many of our best skills in pre-school and kindergarten that set the stage for the rest of our lives: sharing and playing well, self-control and self-direction. The importance of early childhood education is more pronounced when we understand the impacts of what kids don't learn in those critical young years.

By age three, children whose parents are on welfare have vocabularies of about 500 words, children of working class parents have about 700 words, and children of college-educated parents have vocabularies of about 1,200 words. Yet words are the key to how successfully children make their way in the world.

I first learned this astonishing fact at the Telluride Economic Summit on Early Childhood Investment. We were there to build business support and advocacy for a state and national early childhood education agenda. The business case for this investment is clear: If the country is to have a competitive global work force, we need to overcome some dismal facts.

It is an interesting coincidence that in Colorado about one-third of students are not ready for grade-level

work in kindergarten through first grade and that about 30 percent of high school students fail to graduate. Remember, it is very difficult to close an achievement gap, especially when it opened up before kindergarten.

In 2008, New York Times columnist David Brooks ruefully noted, "By age 5, it is possible to predict, with depressing accuracy, who will complete high school and college and who won't."

In just a few weeks, the U.S. Senate Health and Education Committee will consider Early Learning Challenge Fund legislation to make available an \$8 billion investment in competitive grants to states that are committed to innovation in early childhood education.

Last year, Colorado established quality standards for "school readiness" for children entering kindergarten, and Gov. Bill Ritter's administration has expanded at-risk preschool programs and full-day kindergarten. Now Colorado has a champion for early childhood education in Sen. Michael Bennet on this key committee in Washington. This is an opportune moment we cannot waste.

Early childhood education reduces the societal cost of children without the skills or knowledge to participate in our economy and our communities. For every \$1 states invest in early childhood programs for disadvantaged children, they create about \$8 in future savings from reduced welfare, fewer placements in special education and lower prison costs.

These are familiar statistics in the research and policy analysis community, but I was struck by the possibility that the return on investment might be even greater if productivity gains could be measured in addition to social savings.

In 2008, the Colorado Office of Economic Development and International Trade surveyed employers about skills needed in their employees. Employers across the state clamored for a work force with 21st century skills: critical thinking and reasoning, information literacy, collaboration, self-direction and invention.

Businesses can teach most technical skills, but not higher order cognitive

and social-emotional skills. These skills begin to emerge very early with the

development of self-regulation. Young children learn to regulate or control

their emotions and actions through nurturing and responsive parents, caregivers, and teachers.

Quality early education is focused like a laser on building the foundations of 21st century skills because they are aligned with social, emotional and cognitive skills learned in early childhood and translate into adults skills employers need.

Employers report that they need employees who are self-directed and have control of their impulses.

Good preschools develop self-regulation.

Employers report they want employees who are critical thinkers and problem solvers. Good preschools introduce children to trial-and-error experimentation and goal-directed behavior.

Employers report that they need employees who are inventive and innovative in the work place. Good preschools encourage children to take the initiative, be curious and play as a way of learning.

Finally, employers report they need much better communication and collaboration within the organization and with customers. Good preschools place a high priority on a child's ability to collaborate and share in the classroom and on the playground.

It might take 15 years for today's finger painters to enter the work force, but expanding early childhood education, especially for disadvantaged children, is an investment in the competitiveness of our country that will pay human, financial and social dividends long into the future.