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Early childhood education called a smart investment

BY NANCY CAMBRIA

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St. LOUIS — Proponents of early childhood education in Missouri got a boost Monday when a Nobel Prize-winning economist made a lucrative pitch to some 40 business leaders at the St. Louis Federal Reserve.

The message: Spend money educating children before their fifth birthday and the financial return in building a future work force will be enormous.

In fact, James Heckman, an economist at the University of Chicago, said money spent on early childhood education has quadrupled the benefits of money spent on adult job training programs and far outpaces investments in high school or college.

Heckman said age 3 is an optimal time to formally teach youngsters emotional control and motivational, organizational and self confidence skills — the "soft skills" that will better ensure that a child one day graduates from high school and achieves a productive adult life.

"We really spend more money later in the life cycle, and the real return comes from spending more in the early years," Heckman said.

"The way we are going to make schools more efficient is by making the children that come into school more efficient," he said.

Proponents of early childhood education used Heckman's address as a rally call to big business, encouraging leaders to lobby state and federal government for more investment in early childhood education.

"What we really hope is to have provided enough inspiration and enough information that some champions will emerge," said Sue Stepleton, president and CEO of Parents as Teachers, one of the event's sponsors. "We hope that momentum will spread."

Heckman presented no new research Monday. Instead, he drew from his years of work connecting data on education, neuroscience, social science and economics as they apply to the development of very young children. That research has been reinforced by both private and federal economic studies, many of which have focused on the economic benefits of investing in preschool for disadvantaged children.

On Monday, child advocates said they want business leaders to become more familiar with the studies, including one by the Minneapolis Federal Reserve that argues returns on early childhood investment trump tax credits and other economic stimulus tools for companies.

Carol Scott, executive director of the Missouri Child Care Resource and Referral Network, said Kansas City economic development leaders have already created an early education arm called the Metropolitan Council on Early Learning. It's a partnership that St. Louis leaders could easily replicate, she said.

In states such as Florida, businesses have lobbied to push the cause of early childhood education with lawmakers, she said.

Heckman said normally conservative businesses are warming to such an alliance because it speaks to the bottom line. He argued that early childhood education drastically cut down on the number of future adults who would spend time in prison, rather than in jobs.

"Before, the case that was made for early childhood was that it is a good and fair thing for children," he said. "The current thinking is, it's a fair thing to do, but it's also an economically efficient thing to do."

It was an idea that had already gained traction among some participants, including CEOs and managers from St. Louis area hospitals, banks, builders and investment firms.

Panelist Richard Baron, chairman and CEO of McCormack Baron Salazar, said his development company learned long ago that urban housing initiatives succeed with early childhood and educational components. Baron argued that Missouri and many other states ought to be investing in young children, but instead end up sinking revenue into the corrections and parole system — an investment that

Heckman argued bears minimal financial returns.

Tom Chulick, chairman and CEO of UMB Bank St. Louis, said the presentation made it clear that early childhood education is a "significant investment," but it's a challenge to get legislators to see beyond the short term to understand what this investment could mean in the next several decades.

St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay said he was optimistic that long-term partnerships would emerge from the event.

"Our community is a very, very generous philanthropic community and also a very energetic business community," he said. "It's just a matter of getting their attention and getting them engaged."

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