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Quality day care crucial to economy, some business leaders say

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At first, day care quality may seem irrelevant to those without young children. But a growing understanding of early brain development, and its role in later life success, is helping the issue gain traction from the classroom to the boardroom.

The National Research Council has found that 90 percent of brain development occurs before the age of 5 — that is, before public school begins. Studies lasting decades show that children with high-quality day care and preschool experiences are more likely to do well in school, graduate and stay out of jail.

The appeal of creating a higher quality work force and saving tax dollars over time appeals to some business leaders.

"There are a number of states around the U.S. where the business community was leading this work," said Milton Little, president of United Way of Metro Atlanta. "That wasn't the case here."

So United Way created an Early Education Commission, co-chaired by the president of Spelman College and the CEO of the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, which made a series of recommendations this spring for improving early childhood learning in the state.

The commission's report concluded: "The future of Georgia's children, workforce and economic vitality is in peril if we do not act now to bring strong leadership and increase investment to increase access to high-quality child care and education."

Dennis Lockhart, co-chairman of the commission and CEO of the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, said the group spent 18 months gathering information, partly by hearing from national economic development leaders.

"It was a matter of making a case to the business community that its historical focus on K-12 needed to be extended to an earlier point in children's development, that it is also an economic development issue," he said. "I came to this with very little knowledge or understanding, but I'm such a convert."

A role for business

Some Macon leaders tried a similar pitch to the state and business community even earlier. The Greater Macon Chamber of Commerce identified early childhood care, along with the quality of local public education, as a weak point more than five years ago.

Improving day care was one of the initial priorities of the nonprofit Education First, which was born of a chamber initiative. But the effort found little support, said Julie Moore, executive director of Education First.

"To our board members, early education and graduation seem so separate, and they're not," Moore said. She pointed out that years of Bibb County school system data showed that the same number of students who were unready for kindergarten were failing ninth grade.

The research helped support the establishment of Northwoods Academy, a public Georgia prekindergarten in Macon that serves as an incubator for new early childhood education techniques, Moore said.

Lockhart said the real goal of the Early Childhood Commission is for all children to be ready for kindergarten and on a path to "read-to-learn" by third grade.

"It should become a mantra," he said.

According to the Early Education Commission, of 50 children having trouble learning to read in kindergarten, 44 will have trouble in the third grade. And those who can't read by third grade are unlikely to graduate from high school.

"It ultimately is a better investment to spend money up front on (ages) zero to 5 than spending money on intervention and remediation later," Moore said. "So we could stop it before it even gets into the pipeline."

Moore said Education First wants to see local businesses such as GEICO or The Medical Center of Central Georgia offer day care at work, or affiliate with a quality private day care. She said concerns about liability are always the stumbling block.

Soraya Kimbrel-Miller, director of the Child Care Resource and Referral Service of Southwest Georgia, also suggested that businesses provide an offset to employees to help them afford better quality care.

According to Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, an anti-crime organization made up of law enforcement, prosecutors and survivors of violence, every two jobs created in the child care sector generate another job in the rest of the economy.

And that money goes primarily toward wages. Since child care jobs must by their nature be local, and most child care workers are low-wage earners, the salaries are likely to be spent quickly in the local economy, the Fight Crime group noted.

Brain development and early childhood care

Pat Willis, executive director of the advocacy group Voices for Georgia's Children, said many people resist the idea of teaching very young children because they picture toddlers crammed into rows of desks. But that's not how little kids learn. Their activities can be designed to be more educational even though they look like "play" to most adults, she said.

Even babies need stimulating experiences to help their brains develop.

"If we talk about education and infants, we get this look like, 'What?'" Willis said. "Very important things happen in a child's brain at that age."

But not everyone with a business perspective is sold on educational requirements for day cares. It has generally been opposed by rural legislators in Georgia, said state Rep. Kathy Ashe, D-Atlanta, who serves on the House Committee on Children and Youth.

Chuck Thompson, a Macon insurance agent with a 2-year-old in day care, said he thinks the market should determine the instructional content of day care programs.

"We need government regulations to make sure our kids are safe and not harmed, physically or emotionally," he said. "But (dictating) what day cares have to offer, like regular school? I don't think that should be required."

He said competition should drive educational elements. Otherwise, new requirements could drive up costs, making day care less affordable to low-income parents, he said.

That's why Pam Tatum, CEO of the advocacy group Quality Care for Children, argues that the state needs to subsidize child care needs.

"We have an education system K-12 that is state funded, and we understand the need for that. But research shows that the first five years are when most brain development occurs, and our investment in those years is minimal," Tatum said.

"So we say the market will take care of it. But if we don't think the market will take care of it K-12, why would it take care of it 1-4, when adult-child ratios must be higher?" she asked.

Early child care professionals have feared that stiffer requirements might drive them out of business, especially during the recession. But Tatum and others suggest that the state could develop programs to help businesses with the transition and be ready to roll them out once the economy improves.

"Any time there's pressure to increase quality, there's going to be some resistance," Little said. "But this is long term. It's not an overnight wrenching change that will put people out of business."