

Investments in early education will place kids on path to success

Written by Brenda Cassellius, Minnesota Commissioner of Education
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Much has been written about the long-term benefits of high quality early education and all day kindergarten, especially for poor children. Research abounds to support investments in young learners as a critical way to close achievement gaps and improve student outcomes. Governor Dayton's budget contains significant new investments for both early childhood education and all day kindergarten, and every sign indicates that substantial investments for early learning will be coming out of the legislature as well.

Minnesota is home to some of the most compelling research on the high return of investment for early learning – up to sixteen dollars for every one dollar invested according to former Federal Reserve Chair Art Rolnick. And there's more: Child-development researchers at the University of North Carolina recently published a study that found low-income students who attended preschool had higher math and reading scores in third grade than their low-income peers who did not. City University of New York conducted a study showing that one in six students who can't read at grade level by third grade will not finish high school by age 19 – nearly four times the rate of their more proficient peers. A study begun in 1962 in Michigan tracked two groups of low-income students - those who attended preschool and those who did not - and found that at age 40, participants who attended preschool had attained higher levels of education, earned higher wages, were more likely to own a home and were less likely to have been incarcerated than those who did not attend preschool.

Yet, despite the evidence, pockets of opposition continue to question the wisdom of early

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childhood education. To which I say this: if you want a real life success story that illustrates the potential for high quality early education to change a life, look at me. I was a Head Start baby.

I can personally attest to the value of early learning, not only the early benefits to a poor girl growing up in the projects of south Minneapolis, but the long-term effects on my life. I could easily have ended up in a cycle of poverty and dependence, but I didn't. Why? For many reasons, including hard work and a little bit of luck, but also because of the early opportunities I received and the parenting support given to my mother, who had my sister at 16 and me at 20.

Head Start allowed me to develop school readiness skills and a love of learning that have lasted a lifetime. I remember the fun of outlining my 4-year old body on a big sheet of paper and labeling my parts, of watching a celery stalk turn red in a glass full of tinted water, of reading my first book, *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, and imagining my own dreams for adventure as I drew them with a purple crayon. My best memory, though, is when my teacher would round us up in a circle at the end of the day to touch the tip of her "magic wand" to the top of our heads, and if we were good and had done all of our work, the magic star on the end would light up.

Why do these experiences matter now, nearly four decades later? Because they taught me perhaps preschool's biggest contribution to a students' future success; the so-called "soft skills," which help children learn how to pay attention and stay on task. My earliest teachers shaped me by instilling not only a love of learning, but also the principles of hard work, goodness and perseverance. These qualities cannot be measured by a test, but they matter a great deal in a competitive and diverse global economy and are necessary for success in life.

I've been lucky. Lucky to be born in the right decade and that my mother had access to resources and support. Lucky to have had great teachers who pushed me to be my best. Lucky that wise Minnesotans who came before me realized that a good education for every child was the surest way to strengthen our state's competitive edge, leading a generation's War on Poverty and crafting a Minnesota Miracle along the way.

But should it come down to luck? The Governor and I believe not. We believe all children deserve access to the same great start I had. Investing now, this year, in our youngest learners - with more scholarships for high quality early education programming and increased access to all-day kindergarten – gives us the best chance to fully leverage the potential that lies within every child.

We may never be able to fully measure the profound impact early learning has on life success. Or maybe we can. Maybe we're just waiting for a future education commissioner – a little girl or boy learning and dreaming in a sun-filled classroom today - to show us just how it's done.