

Early Childhood Programs Pay Off

Nebraska voters already have shown they support early childhood education.

In 2006, they approved Amendment 5, which set up an endowment to provide a continuing source of funding for programs to provide better learning experiences for preschool children.

Now Nebraska's congressional delegation should follow their lead by supporting the Early Learning Challenge Fund that would provide \$1 billion to states for programs such as Head Start, Early Head Start, pre-kindergarten and quality child care.

Why?

Because it's one of the best investments of public dollars that can be made.

Don't just take our word for it.

Pay heed to local hard-headed law enforcement professionals who deal with the worst that society has to offer on a daily basis.

Speaking out in support of increased funding for early childhood education this week were Lincoln Police Chief Tom Casady, Lancaster County Attorney Gary Lacey and his chief deputy Joe Kelly.

"It's a concept that makes complete sense to all of us in this line of work," Kelly said. "The mission is validated by research."

Studies show a return of as much as \$13 for every dollar invested in care and learning systems for disadvantaged children, according to Jen Hernandez of the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation.

The return comes in the form of savings in the cost of operating the criminal justice system, welfare, schools and other public systems. Research shows that participants in early childhood programs are as much as 29 percent more likely to graduate from high school and 40 percent less likely to repeat grades or be placed in special education.

Lacey noted that county taxpayers are footing the bill for a new \$60 million-plus jail. "We need to spend money at the front end and not the back end," he said.

Casady said decades of experience as a police officer showed him the importance of early childhood learning. Too often police are now chasing around the grandchildren of the people police were chasing when he joined the force, Casady said.

Nebraska voters took an important step forward to improving the state's early childhood programs when they approved the amendment to the state constitution that sets aside earnings from \$40 million of the state's permanent Education Lands Fund for early childhood programs.

Another \$14 million has been raised so far to create a matching \$20 million private endowment handled by the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation. Jump-starting that effort was \$5 million from the Susan Buffett Foundation.

Too often spending money on early childhood programs doesn't seem to interest politicians. The payoff is so far in the future that there's no immediate political benefit. In this case, however, Nebraska voters have shown the way. The congressional delegation should take its cue from them.

Posted: Thursday, September 3, 2009 - JournalStar.com