

February 20, 2009

State view: Minnesota's youngest citizens have many allies

Todd Otis for the News Tribune

These are very tough times for families, businesses and just about everybody. We are forced to grapple with the worst economy in a quarter century. State government is facing a huge deficit — perhaps more than \$6 billion — and many critical government services are in danger of being cut. We are hearing a lot about “tough choices.”

There is something else you always hear, too: “Children are our future.” The earliest years of Minnesota’s youngest citizens are the foundations of their lives and the future of our state’s economy. Early childhood care and education is an important economic development issue for Minnesota since it is the basis of the skilled work force of the future. Even in tough times we need to support our youngest children.

Leaders in Northeastern Minnesota have shown they understand this.

The Northland Foundation has been working hard to provide leadership for our youngest children for years. The foundation’s vice president, Lynn Haglin, serves on the Ready 4 K board and strongly supports Ready 4 K’s efforts to improve state investment in early childhood care and education. As a leader of the Early Childhood Initiative, the Northland Foundation has funded 13 early-childhood coalitions in the region to strengthen local resources for young children and their families and to raise awareness of early care and education issues.

The United Way of Greater Duluth also has been providing leadership on early-childhood issues, including through important early literacy work as well as strategies to improve awareness of what goes into school readiness. The United Way also has helped support Ready 4 K’s organizing efforts in Duluth. Its leaders understand well the long-term implications of not improving this issue area.

The Blandin Foundation and its key allies in Grand Rapids also have provided significant, innovative leadership in its Invest Early initiative, creating a model of community support for quality early care and education that is demonstrating real results. Blandin’s president, Jim Hoolihan, is another member of the Ready 4 K board.

Lawmakers from Northeastern Minnesota have stepped up, as well.

U.S. Rep. Jim Oberstar, who has held hearings on early care and education, said, “The essential investments that we make in our children will pay handsome dividends in better and healthier communities.”

State Sens. Tom Bakk, Tom Saxhaug, David Tomassoni and Tony Lourey, as well as Reps. Tom Huntley, Mary Murphy, Bill Hilty, Tom Rukavina, Tony Sertich, Loren Solberg and David Dill are members of the Minnesota Legislature’s Early Education Caucus.

The early childhood community in Duluth is fortunate to have a local legislator, Rep. Tom Huntley, overseeing the state’s child-care budget in his role as chairman of the House Health and

Human Services Finance Division. Chairman Huntley's committee will be important in determining the amount of resources allocated to child care during this legislative session.

Research by Federal Reserve Bank economist Dr. Art Rolnick has shown that of all public investments, the public receives the highest return on investment with strategically targeted, quality investment in early care and education. When that happens, children enjoy much greater school success in K-12, and have better-paying jobs, safer communities, and use less public assistance.

Even during an economic downturn, it makes no sense to "sell off" the best-performing stock in the state's portfolio. Yet that is exactly what happened during our state's last budget crisis. In 2003, early childhood programs were hit with massive cuts, disproportionate to the mere 1 percent of the overall state budget that those programs constitute. That can't happen again.

Today would be a good day for all of us to contact legislators and the governor and to encourage their strong support of our youngest citizens.
Let's not turn our back on Minnesota's future.

Todd Otis is president of Ready 4 K, a statewide nonprofit promoting public policies and awareness to improve school readiness in Minnesota. He wrote this for the News Tribune.