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West Virginia group wants more resources for early childhood

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — Early childhood programs such as readily available day care and in-home help for parents shouldn't be seen merely as social initiatives but also as tools for economic growth, a new report argues.

In the report released Monday, nonprofit think tank Imagine West Virginia advocates two new policies in those terms, although it leaves some key elements, such as costs, to be determined later.

"It is very much an economic development program," said Marshall University economist Cal Kent, who helped craft the report called "Right and Smart."

Investment in early childhood programs, Kent said, provides long-term benefits to the state in the form of reduced costs for social programs and government spending — including jails and prisons — aimed at adults.

"If you do it right early on, you get lower crime, you get fewer dropouts, you get better college attendance, you get healthier people," he said. "You get all the benefits society doesn't have to pay for in later life."

The report offers two key recommendations. First, it calls for widespread, affordable child care, citing evidence that more than half the state's children under age six live in a single-parent household or have two working parents.

Essential to that proposal is the development of a system for evaluating and monitoring the quality of such programs, which would be geared toward children from newborns to 3-year-olds, said Rick Remish, executive director of the think tank.

The second proposal calls for the expansion of "in-home family education," which would involve home visitations and assistance for parents in areas ranging from health and immunization to promoting early reading.

About 22 counties in the state have similar programs, but the report says they should have broader availability.

West Virginia is ideal for such initiatives, said Tom Heywood, a member of Imagine West Virginia's board of governors. He noted that the state has already launched a nationally-lauded pre-kindergarten program for 4-year-olds and has expanded its Children's Health Insurance Program to cover a greater percentage of children than other states.

"We truly are a leader, and we have an opportunity for greater leadership," he said. The state's small size would also make such programs relatively inexpensive."

There are about 122,000 children under age 6 in West Virginia, with the report identifying 64,000 as "at risk" and in greater need of services like those it proposes.

"That's a very manageable number," Heywood said.

The report, though, doesn't offer a dollar estimate on the proposals' cost, and it leaves unanswered such questions as to whether the programs would be public, private or a mix of both.

The next step, if there's sufficient legislative interest, is to begin filling in some of those details, Kent said.