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Report stresses importance of early childhood education

By Erica Peterson



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January 27, 2009 ·

Imagine West Virginia, a state-wide independent research entity, released a report Monday on early childhood programs in West Virginia.

The report, titled Right and Smart, argues the state devote more resources to helping children between the ages of birth and five.

I think we all certainly agree that every West Virginia child should have the best chance for a healthy productive life," Executive Director Rick Remish said.

"Speaking to our report's title, we know that it's the right thing to do. If you stop and look at the numbers, you see that the IWWV declaration recognizes that early childhood investments are the smart economic thing."

Early investment in these programs, focusing specifically on the birth-to-three age group, will eventually produce a healthier and more productive workforce, the report says.

Cal Kent is with the Marshall University Center for Business and Economic Research. He was one of the lead researchers for Imagine West Virginia's report.

"When we think about early childhood education and early child care, what we often say to ourselves is, well that's great for the kids, it's great for the parents, and it is," Kent said. "But what we have to recognize is that there are phenomenal, phenomenal benefits to the state as a whole."

He says early childhood programs result in a decreased drain on taxpayers years down the line. Benefits include decreased crime, lower drop-out rates, increased college attendance, and better health.

Imagine West Virginia's report comes in the wake of little-publicized news that the state may reduce services for young children with developmental delays.

Proposed changes are being reviewed by the Office of Special Education programs to the Birth to Three program.

Under the current standards, children with “substantial developmental delays” or at least four risk factors for developmental problems are eligible for the program. If the new standards take effect, only those with “very substantial developmental delays” or five risk factors will be eligible.

Remish says the threat of spending cuts only increases the importance of reports like this one.

“We will definitely be supporting a continued focus on early childhood development programming and policies that are a right investment for West Virginia children and families,” he said.

Imagine West Virginia is solely a research organization, but the lobbying group A Vision Shared will take this message to the Legislature in the upcoming session.