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Educate kids early to help everyone later, businesses say

They say the investment will pay off with less crime, highly skilled workers and more productive citizens.

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PORTLAND — Maine has a lot to gain by investing more in early child care and education, according to a new report from a national business organization that has growing local support.

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Every dollar spent on early child care and education in Maine generates an additional 78 cents in new spending in other areas of the economy, Maine members of America's Edge said Tuesday.

Greater spending on pre-kindergarten programs also would help to reduce job absenteeism among parents and special education rates among children, business leaders said at a news conference at Mercy Hospital. Other long-term benefits would include increased high school graduation rates, more skilled workers and new businesses, and reduced crime and unemployment.

John Peters, president of Downeast Energy, noted that 65 percent of fourth-graders in Maine tested below grade level in reading, 64 percent of eighth-graders tested below grade level in math, and 22 percent of Maine high school students fail to graduate within four years.

"I'm primarily a numbers guy," Peters said. "The cost of dropping out of high school is enormous. We have to start before the first day of kindergarten."

Peters and other local members of America's Edge urged lawmakers to continue support for public funding of early childhood programs such as Head Start. They also

called on business owners and others to join their effort to increase public and private investment in early child care and education.

America's Edge is a national organization of business leaders who support investment in children's programs as a form of economic development. More than 70 Mainers are members of the group, including representatives of Bath Iron Works, Lamey Wellehan, FairPoint Communications, Quirk Auto and several health care organizations.

America's Edge estimates that 36,643 Maine children younger than 5 -- about half -- are now served by early care and education programs, according to the group's report, "Strengthening Maine Businesses through Investment in Early Care and Education."

The group wants to increase the number of Maine children served by pre-kindergarten programs to 53,521 -- 75 percent of the 71,361 kids who are younger than 5.

To reach that number, Maine must invest an additional \$145 million in early care and education programs, according to the report. That initial investment in education would generate an additional \$115 million in spending in other areas of the economy. The \$260 million in new spending would create 4,700 new jobs.

"We need to spend those dollars on what we know works," said Eileen Skinner, Mercy Hospital's chief executive officer.

Dana Connors, president of the Maine State Chamber of Commerce, urged investment in early education to take advantage of early brain development, when children are most open to new skills and ideas.

Studies have shown that every dollar spent on high-quality early education programs for at-risk children can save as much as \$16 in future costs to society, such as remedial education and crime, according to the report.

America's Edge members say that Maine should strive to produce better-educated and more-productive citizens from the start.

"It's going to cost us a lot more not to" support early care and education programs, Connors said.

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