

## Falling behind: State loses ground on education of its children

In Arkansas, we're falling behind on the very first step of our journey to a more educated workforce: ensuring that children are ready to learn when they enter school.

Unless we turn this around, we will never become the haven for economic development that we know our state should and could be.

Just a few years ago, we were climbing the charts — lauded nationally for our access to quality early childhood education. This is the kind of intervention that gives children in low-income families — like half the kids here in Northwest Arkansas — a much better chance to succeed in school and go on to reach their full potential.

It's also the kind of investment that pays huge dividends for our state. It's hard to find a better return: higher graduation rates, lower incarceration rates and a better-educated population. Basically, the kinds of things make us attractive to businesses looking for a skilled and modern workforce.

But in rankings released last month by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, our state's slide is beginning to show. We were ranked 16th in 2009 in terms of preschool attendance, and now we're ranked 22nd.

Five years ago, 40,000 3- and 4-year-olds were not attending preschool in Arkansas, according to this national data. In 2013, the latest year for the data rankings, that number was up to 44,000.

We're headed in the wrong direction after years of making a big difference. What happened? We stopped investing. We stopped making it a priority. We didn't put any more funding into the pre-K program for eight years. Not a dollar — not even a cost-of-living increase. Predictably, we're beginning to see the results of those policy decisions. We're going to pay the price in our overall education system and in our state's long-term economic prospects.

We can't enjoy the return if we don't make the investment.

We can stop this slide — and even start moving forward again — by ensuring that we fully fund the highly successful, state-funded program that is aptly named Arkansas Better Chance. It's offered in school districts and also private child care centers. It's targeted to low-income families who otherwise wouldn't have access to a high-quality program and whose children are statistically more likely to fall behind in their early years of school. It's a way to catch them up to their peers, helping them and also all the other kids in their elementary classrooms.

As Springdale Superintendent Jim Rollins has said, the difference in school success between kids who have quality pre-K and those who don't is “the difference between night and day.” The early learning sticks with kids and gives them confidence, helping to instill that “grit” that so many researchers point to as the resilience factor that children need to overcome poverty.

Ask the teachers and school officials you know. They'll tell you this is a great program that gets kids ready to learn, but we just don't have enough slots for all the children who need it.

While you're at it, ask a business owner you know why early education matters. Are they having trouble finding workers with basic skills or an adequate educational foundation to do the jobs they have to offer? Chances are they'll tell you this is one of their biggest obstacles. This lack of skills starts in the early years. Research shows that 80 percent of brain development occurs before we're 5.

Children in the Arkansas Better Chance program have seen significant gains. A study of ABC students showed their proficiency average jumped from 24 percent to 82 percent in one year. Those are gains in language, literacy and math development, as well as improved social skills. The program works.

There's only one reason to pay attention to rankings like the ones the Casey Foundation puts out each year in its Kids Count Data Book. It's to make sure we've got our priorities straight and where we all say they belong — with our children. If the No. 1 state (Minnesota this year) is doing something we could replicate and we can afford, why not try?

When it comes to pre-K access, we already know what works and what we should replicate. We've got a quality and targeted program that is successful. It just needs to be a higher priority.

This year, the state Legislature set aside some one-time funding — not part of the regular budget — that amounted to the first new investment in the Arkansas Better Chance program since 2008. Parents, teachers and advocates like me are grateful to a bipartisan group of lawmakers, as well as Gov. Asa Hutchinson and his staff, for making it a priority for the first time in far too long.

But it was much less than needed, and it wasn't in the regular state budget. So we'll be starting over this coming budget year with a new challenge to our state's leaders. We'll ask them to ensure that we fund this highly successful, much needed opportunity for our state's kids.

Help us make the case that education is important economic development work in Arkansas, and that early education sets the stage for our state's success.

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