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## GUEST VIEWPOINT

Boosting kids early worth the cost

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Early childhood education can be considered economic development. It improves the quality of the future work force and creates tremendous cost savings for society, according to an analysis done by an economist and researcher at the Minnesota Federal Reserve Bank.

Well-focused investments in high-quality early childhood education programs ensure that children arrive at school ready to learn. Children ready for school are more likely to be ready for life, without need of assistance.

If America is indeed committed to the notion of leaving no child behind, and to making high-quality education for every child a top priority, our efforts and investments must start in the early years of life. Education does not simply begin with kindergarten.

All children are born ready to learn. All of a child's early experiences, whether at home, in child care or in other preschool settings, are educational. Ninety percent of a person's brain develops in the first five years of life. It is critically important that children have good nutrition, nurturing relationships, stimulating environments and positive experiences during these formative years. Yet we invest the very least amount of public and private dollars and other resources in this age group.

So why pay early? Several studies provide solid evidence that each dollar invested in good early childhood education programs results in \$3 to \$8 in benefits. The advantages to the public are greatest when the programs are of high quality and reach children from the poorest families. By investing early, taxpayers benefit later because fewer children need remedial educational services, more children graduate from high school and more children get better paying jobs. Tax revenue is increased, the need for welfare assistance is reduced, and the burden on the criminal justice system is lightened.

Young children do not begin school as equals. Children of poor families generally start kindergarten with significantly lower social, language and cognitive skills than their more advantaged counterparts.

In fact, a University of Kansas study shows that by age 3 the differences are already dramatic. The vocabularies of 3-year-olds who live in poor families are half the size and less complex than those of their peers from professional families. This gap continues to widen until children enter school, and these discrepancies continue throughout their years in school.

Research shows that poor children deprived of early education are more likely as teens and adults to engage in crime, use illegal drugs, commit