



Talking Points

For use by school leaders in papers or presentations
about important issues related to public education

Begin at the Beginning

Key Message: A person's capacity to become a happy, healthy, contributing adult begins to take shape at the beginning of that person's life. It is our collective responsibility as a society to provide the environment and opportunities within which that development is most likely to take place.

“What happens – or doesn't happen – to children in the earliest years of their lives is of critical importance, both to their immediate well-being and to their future.” – UNICEF.org

Most of a child's brain cells are formed before birth, but the connections between those cells are made after birth. It is those connections that make the brain cells work. By the time a child is three years old, they have formed about 1,000 trillion connections – two times as many as they are likely to form as an adult. It is up to all of us to ensure that the connections that contribute to academic and social success are developed and exercised during early childhood.

Sometimes when we hear the term “early childhood,” we think of a program or a class. While early childhood may include both, it is neither. Early childhood is the period in a person's life when that person's mind is developing and those critical connections are being made within the brain. Early childhood begins prenatally and extends to about five years old. Early childhood has been described as a window of opportunity in a person's life when learning is most efficient and most likely to occur.

“We have a lot of research that says if a child is in a healthy environment, in a loving environment in which there's bonding between the parents and the child, where there's positive interaction, so the child starts ready for school, cognitively ready and socially ready, there's a high probability that child will succeed in life. If not, there's a high probability he or she will not.” – Art Rolnick, economist, Humphrey Institute fellow, and former research director at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis

That's where early childhood begins, but not where it ends. Research demonstrates that a child's social, physical and academic development is enriched through high-quality early childhood programs. This is particularly true for at-risk children. Projections indicate that the real financial return on the investment in high-quality early childhood education, particularly for high risk kids, is \$10 to \$16 for each dollar spent. Studies also demonstrate early childhood education is the most likely way to close the achievement gap among diverse populations of students. The long-term savings to U.S. taxpayers if good early childhood programs are implemented would likely be in the billions of dollars.

“Studies show that high-quality early childhood programs aligned with K-3 standards can narrow the achievement gap by 25% or more before kids start kindergarten.” – P. Fred Storti, Executive Director, Minnesota Elementary School Principals’ Association

“The return on the investment in early childhood is significant, from an economic standpoint; from a moral standpoint, this investment has the potential for closing the achievement gap and equalizing the potential for future social and economic success for all children.” – Gary Amoroso, Executive Director, Minnesota Association of School Administrators

“Although education and the acquisition of skills is a lifelong process, starting early in life is crucial. Recent research – some sponsored by the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis in collaboration with the University of Minnesota – has documented the high returns that early childhood programs can pay in terms of subsequent educational attainment and in lower rates of social problems, such as teenage pregnancy and welfare dependency.” – Ben S. Bernanke, Federal Reserve Board Chairman, speech to Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce, 2007

“We know that children who are supported in their early learning are more successful as they progress to the secondary level and more likely to earn their high school diploma and be prepared for post secondary education and a career.” – Joann Knuth, Executive Director, Minnesota Association of Secondary School Principals

“Why should taxpayers want to invest their dollars in quality early education for every child whose family wants it? The research is clear that it helps children succeed. That’s one reason. But there is another that is very important but less well known. That reason is this: it makes financial sense. Tax dollars invested create economic development in communities, and save money for years to come.” – “Early Childhood Education for All: A Wise Investment” by Leslie J. Calman, Senior Vice President, Legal Momentum and the director of the Family Initiative, Linda Tarr-Whelan, managing partner of Tarr-Whelan and Associates

The experts agree that early childhood education is one of the smartest investments we can make in the future. Too often, however, our public policies and resources are spent on short-term and politically popular issues before they can be invested in stabilizing and improving the long-term future. This can and must be changed for the welfare of our kids and the prosperity of our state. The data is clear. Our commitment is not.



Minnesota Association of School Administrators
Minnesota Association of Secondary School Principals
Minnesota Elementary School Principals’ Association

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