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## **Report: Early Child Care Vital for Economic Success**

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**Putting more resources into early child care and in-home family education will produce a healthier and smarter population in the Mountain State, a Morgantown-based policy institute has concluded.**

Story by Walt Williams

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CHARLESTON -- Putting more resources into early child care and in-home family education will produce a healthier and smarter population in the Mountain State, a Morgantown-based policy institute has concluded. The eight-page report by Imagine West Virginia found that more investment in a child's first three years of life ultimately will make West Virginia more competitive in the global marketplace since those first years are crucial for cognitive development.

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

Kent, one of the report's principle advisers, and several members of Imagine West Virginia's board of governors gathered Jan. 26 at the state Capitol to release the group's findings.

The report cited a 2005 Massachusetts Institute of Technology study that found that every \$1 spent on quality early child development saves as much as \$13 in education, criminal justice and welfare. West Virginia could expect \$5.20 in savings for every \$1 spent, according to the authors.

That is because good early childhood programs lead to increases in cognitive and social development, educational performance and parental involvement while reducing crime, welfare dependency and abuse and neglect, the authors reported.

Citing one example, the authors noted that a 3-year-old child whose parents are on welfare generally has a total vocabulary of 400 words. A 3-year-old child with college-educated parents generally has a vocabulary of 1,200 words, giving that child a jump-start in educational attainment.

Imagine West Virginia recommended that state policy makers advance a system of early child care that is available, affordable and adheres to a quality rating and improvement system.

At the same time, policy makers should create a comprehensive system of in-home education across the entire state.

The authors didn't put a price tag on how much the recommendations would cost to implement, but they insisted both were vital to improving the state's economic well-being and its citizens' health.

"During these difficult economic times, we must not forget the children," said Rick Remish, executive director of Imagine West Virginia.

More than half of the state's children younger than 6 live in either a single-parent household or one in which one or both parents work, the authors wrote. With that in mind, child care in the state needs to offer programming that supports brain development and physical well-being.

Financial incentives also are needed to help child care providers meet quality standards, and families need to be educated in a way that enables them to make better choices, the authors wrote.

In addition, the report cites research finding that in-home family education reduces risk factors such as low-birth weight, smoking and drug use by pregnant women, and child abuse and neglect. Under such a program, educators visit homes to educate families about proper child care and to help them gain access to early and prenatal care.

Only time will tell whether state lawmakers will act on the recommendations. When the Legislature meets in February, lawmakers will face a state budget that is projected to shrink in coming years because of the slowing economy, so they may be unwilling to launch any new programs that call for more government spending.

However, board member Thomas Heywood, a managing partner with Bowles Rice, McDavid Graff and Love PLLC, said the state is a leader in managing the state Children's Health Insurance Program and making kindergarten available to 4-year-old children.

He said he believes it can do the same in early childhood care.

"If you look around the nation, we truly are a leader, and we have an opportunity for still greater leadership," he said.

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