

Other view: Spend smarter, Minnesota, to benefit school readiness

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Babies to 5-year-olds should be a top legislative priority, say the business leaders who make up the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation. The foundation includes such heavy hitters as a retired Best Buy vice chairman, the CEO of General Mills, the former head of Taylor Corp., and an economist formerly with the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank.

The foundation outlined its plan of action last week, and it's a sound one that deserves consideration. Rather than ask for new state money, as many plans do, this one instead wants the \$400 million now spent by state, county and federal governments in Minnesota on low-income kids to be spent differently. In a state that is facing a \$6.2 billion shortfall, that is the only way the business leaders would make it very far in St. Paul this year.

The group knows that half of Minnesota's kids aren't ready for kindergarten. That lack of preparedness is a predictor for how kids will do for the rest of their lives because 90 percent of brain development occurs before age 5. This is not new information. Art Rolnick, the former Federal Reserve economist, for years has talked about the need for quality early childhood education. He and a colleague determined that for every \$1 invested in good early childhood programs, the return is \$16 through better-performing taxpayers who cost less in the social service and criminal justice systems.

After doing its own \$20 million, five-year study, the foundation came up with recommendations for the state

They include the use of a rating system, called Parent Aware, that identifies and rewards child-care providers who are best at preparing children for school. The pilot for this rating system was done in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties. The ratings are meant to empower parents who are shopping for child care to demand school readiness as a top priority.

The foundation's recommendations also include providing financial incentives by making scholarships available to low-

income parents so they can access highly rated day cares; training and retaining tax credits to promote better preparation, stability and income for early childhood professionals; and encouraging private donations to expand access and improve program quality by giving Early Learners Hero Tax Credits.

The group also emphasizes a reward system instead of regulation to push quality in child care.

And it's not just the families that benefit from good child care. The entire state benefits when high-quality child care is preparing our children for their future, as well as the state's future.

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