

No, they're not on drugs: Business leaders who embrace early childhood education

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/she-the-people/wp/2013/08/01/no-theyre-not-on-drugs-business-leaders-ceos-bipartisan-politicians-embrace-early-childhood-education/>

By **Brigid Schulte**, Published: August 1 at 7:00 am [E-mail the writer](#)



The United States spends less and has fewer children attend preschool than many other industrialized countries, according to the Center for American Progress.

Brian Maher stood at a podium in front of a sold-out crowd at the august U.S. Chamber of Commerce building across from the White House Wednesday morning and started in on a big speech on: early childhood education.

That's right. In front of the nation's most powerful business group, the retired chairman and CEO of Maher Terminals, one of the biggest port terminals on the East Coast, and former chairman of the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce wanted to talk about embracing preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds. And high quality "Birth to Five" learning — in other words, good child care.

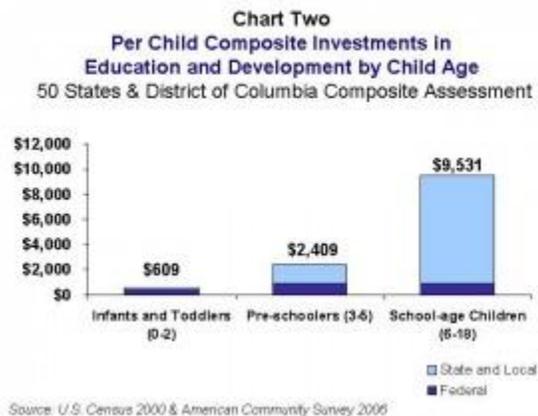
If she hadn't already, Betty Friedan would have died and gone to heaven.

Maher acknowledged as much.

"If somebody had said to me about a decade ago ... that I would one day be down here in Washington speaking on behalf of early childhood education, I would have thought they were on drugs," he said.

But Maher was only one of a host of business leaders, CEOs, advocates, policy wonks and bipartisan political leaders, including Delaware Gov. Jack Markell, a Democrat, and George W. Bush's former education secretary Margaret Spellings, a Republican, all gathered at the Chamber to make the business case that robust public and private investment to create a high-quality early childhood education system is the only way to secure the future.

Right now, the U.S. ranks at the bottom internationally of countries with children enrolled in preschool programs. Jonathan Cohn, in *The New Republic*, recently outlined the expensive, wildly uneven in quality and often dangerous "Hell of American Daycare." [Public spending for children 0-5 lags far behind what we spend on children 6-18.](#)



Public spending on K-12 far outstrips investments in preschool.

And business leaders say the results of that unhappy system are beginning to show.

Maher and others outlined the challenges facing the country: growing income inequality, a shrinking middle class, increasing unemployment and a lack of skilled workers in many industries — and the pernicious and long-lasting effects of growing up poor.

Then he and others presented the growing body of compelling research that shows the more investment in high-quality, early learning from birth to age five, when children's brains are literally sizzling with activity and making new neural connections, the better the outcomes for the future, with higher academic performance (high school graduation rates increased by 30 percent and college attendance doubled), lower health care, special education and social welfare costs and increased productivity.

"Early childhood education is not an entitlement," Maher said. "It's an investment in the future."

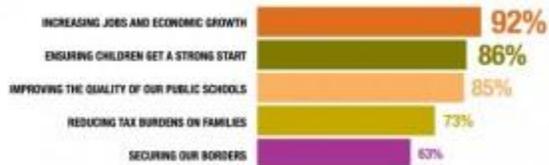
Maher spoke at the event, "Oh, The Places We'll Go!," a play on a Dr. Seuss book, which was sponsored by the rightward leaning Chamber *and* the leftward leaning Center for American

Progress. And the common ground that they found in this very high-profile, public forum shows just how far the discussion of early childhood education has come from the days when it was relegated to obscure education conferences and small-circulation academic journals.

At a time when [President Obama's \\$75 billion "Preschool for All" initiative](#) has gone nowhere in Congress – and the president said in May that he had doubts that it ever would – Maher released the results of a [bipartisan poll](#) that even the staunchest advocates said surprised them.

Voters across the country rated ensuring that children get a strong start with early childhood education as second in priority only to increasing jobs and economic growth. Seventy percent favored doing more to make sure children begin kindergarten ready to learn. Nearly 90 percent said it's important to make early education and child care more affordable – in many states child care costs now outstrip the cost of college.

Seventy-seven percent supported the president's early education plan as long as it didn't add to the debt or deficit. The plan is designed to be deficit neutral and funded with a 94-cent per pack increase in the cigarette tax. That support included 84 percent of Democrats, 64 percent of Independents and 60 percent of Republicans.



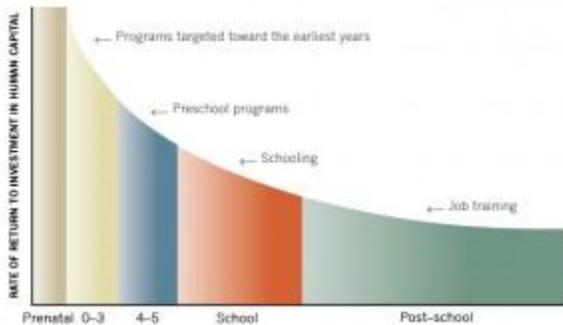
A poll by the First Five Years' Fund shows that voters rank early childhood education just behind jobs.

“We were just really bowled over by the results, particularly among Republicans,” Kris Perry, First Five Years Fund’s executive director, told me. “The science, the data and the evidence have always been on our side.” What’s changing, what’s bringing early childhood education out of obscurity and academia and onto center stage, are the state and business leaders who’ve seen the data and joined the fight, refusing to wait for Congress to take action.

A big turning point for the business community, she said, was not only seeing the research on the developing brain, she said, but emerging work showing early education’s stunning return on investment. Nobel laureate economist James Heckman has documented that for every dollar spent on early childhood education, particularly for the neediest children, the

return is \$7 in improved academics and productivity and lower social costs like prison and welfare.

Returns to a Unit Dollar Invested



Economist James Heckman, a Nobel laureate, has found that investing in early childhood education has a greater return on investment than annual returns of the stock market since World War II.

I moderated a panel exploring how, in the vacuum created by federal inaction, states like Oklahoma, Delaware and Illinois have taken the lead in creating early childhood education systems, continuing to invest even as the Great Recession forced budget cutbacks elsewhere.

Phyllis Hudecki, executive director of Oklahoma’s Business and Education Coalition, said that she lived in the “reddest of the red states,” with the governor’s mansion and the state legislature controlled by conservative Republicans. And yet Oklahoma has one of the oldest early childhood education programs. It is fully supported by the local business community, she said, and shows some of the most impressive long-term gains, particularly for the poorest children who, without more intensive support early on, show up at school far behind their peers without much chance of catching up.

Because the state has term limits, she said she spends a fair amount of her time on the “rubber chicken” circuit, going to Rotary Clubs, making the case, re-educating new lawmakers “with short attention spans and clay feet that crumble under pressure” on the importance of early childhood education — followed by good public schools — for ensuring academic success, economic development and creating strong communities.

That, John Pepper, the former CEO of Procter and Gamble and early education advocate, said, is where the powerful, money and influence of businesses can come in. “The return on investments make early childhood education what we call in business a No Brainer,” he said. “And the role of business is obvious. We have to reach the legislators.”

“What are we waiting for?” one questioner asked.

It's an unprecedented moment, with such broad bipartisan coalitions speaking out — business groups like the chamber and ReadyNation and retired military generals who've formed Mission: Readiness, joining educators, child advocates, women's groups and heavens, even feminists.

The question is, as lawmakers head home for the August recess, will such a deeply divided and dysfunctional Congress listen?