

LIVINGSTON DAILY.COM

July 30, 2009

Phil Power: Restore early childhood funding

We are in an age of necessary belt-tightening, budget-cutting and grumpy cynicism. It is very tempting to join those who argue that most things government does aren't really worth it.

It's true enough that Lansing has made some pretty poor choices. But some of those haven't been spending decisions, but penny-wise and pound-foolish budget cuts.

For example, check out the ways Lansing has accepted repeated cuts in public support to Michigan's public universities, to the point we now spend more on warehousing felons in our prison system than on educating young minds in college.

We have repeatedly slashed funding for the Department of Natural Resources, even as we complain about the parks being closed. We're also on the verge of eliminating state support for the arts and culture, while at the same time trumpeting that one of the nicest things about Michigan is the quality of life to be found here.

This is part of our tendency to engage in what your mother might have called "cutting off your nose to spite your face."

Here's one seemingly small, but very important example of this that's been going on since the beginning of the year — important because there is still time to do something about it. The Legislature and Gov. Jennifer Granholm have:

- Eliminated prekindergarten programs for more than 30,000 Michigan 4-year-olds, "saving" \$103 million.
- Reduced child-care support for low-income working families, saving \$135 million.
- Reduced support to Medicaid providers who offer health-care services to children under age 5, saving around \$25 million.
- Eliminated all funding for the Early Childhood Investment Corp., an outfit that supports early childhood education and quality child care in Michigan, saving \$14 million.

What's the common thread in all of these budget reductions? They go after programs designed to educate and care for very young children. Some in the state Senate want to cut them even further.

That's too bad. Especially since there is compelling evidence that there are few more worthwhile investments.

Early childhood interventions have been shown to increase readiness to enter kindergarten, vastly increase learning rates through all levels of school, reduce welfare and criminality and increase the likelihood that families will stay together.

What's more, such programs are cost-effective. According to a comprehensive analysis undertaken by the RAND Corp. in 2005, the benefits to society resulting from early childhood intervention

programs range from 2 to 1 to 17 to 1.

Put another way, spending \$1 now on early childhood education and support saves the taxpayers something between \$2 and \$17 over the life of the child.

The RAND analysis looked at a number of studies that differed in their methodology and in the time over when they calculated society's benefits. Probably the best study was undertaken right here in Michigan, at the HighScope Perry Preschool Program in Ypsilanti. The study followed children to the age of 40 and found that a per-capita cost of around \$14,000 resulted in net benefits to society of nearly \$240,000. Think about that. Don't you wish you could find an investment that returned \$17 for every buck you put in? Well, this is one of those, and we have been turning our back on it.

Our leaders in Lansing would defend themselves by saying, not surprisingly, that the state is in the midst of a budget crisis, facing a deficit that likely will run as high as \$2 billion.

Unfortunately, they would add, the severity of the situation forces draconian budget cuts that sometimes result in throwing out the baby with the bathwater. (Perhaps I could have found a better metaphor. But then again, when you think about it ... perhaps not.)

What they need to remember is that cutting early childhood care runs not only big social but big political risks, many of them perhaps not fully understood by legislators who have too much to absorb and too little time to take it all in. According to a statewide poll conducted by Lake Research Partners this June, three-quarters of Michigan voters want early childhood development and education programs protected from budget cuts.

Sponsored by the Early Childhood Investment Corp., the poll found that 83 percent of adults think early childhood programs are "an absolute necessity" for their community.

These findings parallel the findings from the nonprofit, nonpartisan Center for Michigan's public engagement campaign, Michigan's Defining Moment, which has involved more than 5,000 Michigan citizens in "community conversations" throughout the state.

Out of these emerged the fact that our citizens have two major priorities: Economic development and prekindergarten education.

Citizens believe that early childhood education and improved child care get children ready to succeed in school ... and in later life.

The governor is negotiating with legislative leaders from both parties to find ways to plug the budget deficit. I suspect that in the rush to address this major financial crisis, they decided to cut early childhood programs without a full understanding of their astonishingly favorable cost-benefit results and the degree of public support. That's not surprising, given how complicated all this is.

But there is still time to do the right thing, which in this case is also economically sensible and politically smart thing. Find the savings elsewhere, and restore the funding to early childhood programs.

Former newspaper publisher and University of Michigan Regent Phil Power is a longtime observer of Michigan politics and economics and a former chairman of the Michigan chapter of the Nature Conservancy. He is also the founder and president of The Center for Michigan, a bipartisan centrist think-and-do tank that is sponsoring Michigan's Defining Moment, a public engagement outreach campaign for citizens. The opinions expressed here are Power's own and do not represent the official views of the center. He welcomes your comments at ppower@thecenterformichigan.net.
