

What happens at earliest age has impact on child, society

Doctors and scientists have by now conclusively proven what experienced parents knew all along: Much of a baby's brain has already developed by kindergarten.

Economists and sociologists have now demonstrated what good cops and judges knew all along: Kids who get lots of preschool enrichment are likely to end up as adults more literate, better employed, less drug-dependent and less likely to engage in crime than kids who don't. A 30-year study by the High-Scope Foundation in Ypsilanti found that a \$1 investment in high-quality early childhood programs eventually saves \$7 in social costs.

Yet as a society, we still don't pay much attention to enriching the early childhood of our kids. It's an enormous and sorry disconnect between what we know and what we do.

For the past three years, groups of Michigan leaders have been working to overcome that disconnect. The Michigan Ready to Succeed Partnership brings together leaders from business, charitable foundations, politics and the media, while the bipartisan Children's Caucus in the Legislature has steadily gained influence and credibility. Both groups will be going into high gear this fall.

In the Legislature, the fight (as usual) is over money. Facing declining revenues, some proposed earlier this year \$48 million in cuts aimed directly at early childhood enrichment programs. Fortunately, the Legislature took off for summer recess before reaching agreement. Now it's time for the Legislature to agree on a budget, and the word from Lansing is that the haggling is tough. Rep. Pam Godchaux, R-Birmingham, a leader in the Children's Caucus, says that important programs like early childhood enrichment could fall through the cracks. She's right.

The big risk is focusing budget cuts on the youngest kids who need help the most (and who don't vote). If lawmakers have to cut, they should do so across the board.

Those tempted to balance the budget on the backs of babies might be interested to know there's a media campaign coming that could change their minds. The Ready to Succeed Partnership has raised more than \$700,000 for a statewide radio and TV advertising campaign designed to emphasize the importance of early



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childhood parenting.

I've looked at the scripts, prepared by the Zim-Merfish ad agency in East Lansing; they're dynamite. The theme line — "Be a hero from age zero" — is set out in shots showing parents bonding with their babies. Key words — read, teach, play, hold, love, care, laugh — scroll across the TV screen, making the point that what parents do with their babies is crucial to their development. The campaign kicks off around Oct. 1, probably just about when the negotiations about the state budget reach the full boil.

To top it off, the Ready to Succeed Partnership is holding a summit conference in Grand Rapids Oct. 4-5. Designed to "gauge Michigan's progress toward the vision of making every child ready to succeed in school and in life," the gathering will bring together some 300 Michigan leaders "to mount a more concerted effort on behalf of our youngest children."

Maybe they should invite Gov. John Engler and leaders from the Michigan House and Senate to the conference. I suspect they'd learn something. At the end of the day, two things strike me as

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significant about the whole matter of early childhood enrichment.

First, it's awfully hard to be against it, especially given the overwhelming scientific and economic evidence that what happens in earliest childhood has such an enormous impact on both the child and on the society.

Second, what's really going on here is an attempt to change long-held cultural assumptions about families, babies, schools and our society.

Time was — when moms stayed at home and families stayed together — that we could tolerate a system that assumed the lives of all babies were adequately enriched until they went off to kindergarten. Just a glance at the composition of today's workforce and at the reality of uninformed parents and broken families is more than enough to persuade me the habits of the past need to be changed.

Phil Power, chairman of HomeTown Communications Network, is a member of the Executive Council of the Michigan Ready to Succeed Partnership. He welcomes your comments, either by voice mail at (734) 933-2047, Ext. 1890, or by e-mail at ppower@homecomm.net.



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Mass transit has battle in the city that put us in cars

It's always a tough sell. Mass transit in southeast Michigan always gets a nod of respect. Everyone agrees it would be a good thing if this area had a good mass transit system. But most people don't want to pay for it, and most people probably wouldn't use it.

That's the reality that confronts Dan Dirks, general manager of the Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation, SMART. Dirks is proud to call himself "a transit guy." He can talk transit and baseball with equal enthusiasm and knowledge. He's the head of the bus system he runs. He'd like to see it be more responsive to the needs of metro Detroit, and he'd like to see it be a bus for state-of-the-art rapid transit system. But in a metro area built around freeways, in a town that put the world on wheels, in a city that no longer has a center, Dirks knows that it isn't easy selling bus travel to the people who have to vote the money.

A couple weeks ago, Dirks and SMART board member and Livonia Mayor Jack Kirksey paid a call on the Observer editorial board to discuss a new service initiative that is intended as an important element of the ambitious SEMCOG 2025 Transportation Plan. Dirks argues that the SEMCOG plan depends on improving SMART service.

The changes would be implemented through four phases over seven years. Capital improvements would cost \$127 million in today's dollars with annual operating costs of \$34 million. Highlights of the plan are: 17 additional full-service routes, four new bus routes to underserved or never-served areas, 12 new park-and-ride lots, reduced waiting times, 18 routes, new Sunday service on 14 routes, longer night and weekend service, increased access to 1.3 million jobs, better transfers to and from major routes, 25 new buses and 23 new bus operators for the community transit services, expansion of the program for senior/disabled, 75 additional vehicles for the community partnership program and 100 new vanpool vehicles available to the public with a more flexible program.

Good stuff. The intention is to increase ridership to 4.3 million a year.

In recent years, Dirks said, SMART has concentrated on providing service for "need" riders. The plan will make the rounds for approvals. Then the question will come up about financing. Currently property owners in communities that opt to participate in SMART in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties pay a one-third mill tax. Dirks estimates it would take another two-thirds of a mill to go forward with the plan, and he's quick to say that he is not advocating for a tax vote. Grant money from the state and federal governments and issuing bonds are other options.

Many communities in the metro area do not participate, including Plymouth, Plymouth Township and Canton Township and most of northern Macomb County.

If SMART is to succeed, it will need to tell a convincing story to people in the suburbs that a well-designed transit system is something they need, something they can use and something that will make their lives better.

Other cities have learned this. But in metro Detroit, it's a tough sell.

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There are things we can do, but nothing will be the same



Joni Hubred

We can mend shattered fences and heal old wounds, because what matters most now is that we have one another to lean on, to talk to, to heal with.

We can give blood. We can respond to national pleas for help from the American Red Cross, the Salvation Army and other charitable organizations. We can give of our time and talents to local organizations whose resources will be depleted to help those devastated by this cowardly act of terrorism.

We can treat each other with kindness and understanding, tolerance and decency.

Let us remember that we are all Americans, shaken to our core but always proud and grateful

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Let us remind each other this, too, shall pass; we are strong and resilient, empowered with the resources to recover. We are still the richest nation in the world. It is time for us to set aside selfish, personal concerns and use our wealth in the cause of mercy and compassion.

Above all, let us pray — each in our own way — for those who died, for those who were injured and for those left behind to cope with lives that will never be the same again.

Joni Hubred is editor of the Farmington Observer. She welcomes your comments by mail to 3341 Grand River, Farmington, MI 48336, FAX: (248) 477-8723 or jhubred@homecomm.net.

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