



# News Release

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*Opinion*  
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## The Case for . . . Quality Early Childhood Education in Iowa

By Max Phillips – Chair, Iowa Business Council  
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Why would an association of executives that lead large Iowa companies and the three public universities in the state have a concern about the quality of early childhood education being offered to our four and five year-olds?

The answer has to do with the fact that the U.S. Department of Labor predicts a shortage of 10 million skilled workers in this country by 2010. Relative to most other states, the need in Iowa stands to be significantly greater. While the population of the United States grew at a robust 4.3% rate during the first half of this decade, Iowa grew at a sluggish 1% pace.

The Iowa Business Council recognizes that, for this state to prominently maintain its presence on the stage of world commerce in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, it must enhance its ability to cultivate, attract, and retain the skilled workforce needed to compete in what is now a global market for talent.

The quality of early childhood education systems has become a key economic development issue in this country. From a short-term perspective more and more states, in their efforts to attract new workforce prospects, tout the innovations and improvements they have made within their own pre-K education systems --- particularly when targeting prospective hires that have young children or soon expect to start a family. This issue impacts long-term workforce needs in that Iowa businesses would prefer to hire freshly minted Iowa graduates who are products of a certified first class education system. The alternative is expending tremendous amounts of human and financial resources recruiting workers from elsewhere that possess the requisite knowledge and skills.

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Research indicates that 90-95% of a child's brain growth occurs before the age of six. Yet, historically, only about one-tenth of Iowa's large annual appropriation for education goes towards pre-K learning. To offer an analogy, there are few successful leaders of companies that expend only 10% of the training money meant for a new hire during the first few months an employee works there. The future value of an employee usually hinges on the quality of initial training provided that individual. Such an investment in human resource should lead to a career path that provides enduring benefits to both the employee and employer. Why, then, would an education system wait until a young person's brain is nearly fully grown before expending the vast majority of available funding? Research confirms that once a child falls behind in learning, he or she tends to stay behind.

The long-term positive outcomes from an investment in early childhood education are hard to ignore. For every dollar invested in a child's pre-K education a return of at least seven dollars occurs overtime, and some experts assert it's as high as a \$17 return on investment. A child exposed to a quality early childhood education is less likely to need special learning programs within a school system. Such a child also has a better chance of becoming a productive and self-sustaining member of society, thereby reducing the need to participate in government subsidy programs or become entangled in the corrections system.

Access to quality early childhood education should be available to parents of all interested Iowa children. Participation by four and five year-olds in these programs should be voluntary, with certifiable standards in place statewide for all publicly-funded and privately-based providers. In the end, the pay-off for investing in quality early childhood education is a more productive employee and dedicated citizen --- an adult who misses work less frequently, gets involved with community and charitable activities, and supports the local tax base.

The Iowa Business Council is pleased with the result from the 2005 Session of the General Assembly that bolstered Iowa's early childhood education system. The infusion of new money appears to be making a measurable difference in the scope and quality of pre-K education being offered in the state. The Council hopes that policy leaders --- from business, education, and government --- continue to collaborate in the effort to build a first class early childhood education system, incorporating such a priority within the confines of a fiscally responsible budget.

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To encourage further conversation about building a quality pre-K system in Iowa, Council members held an Early Childhood Education Summit on March 1<sup>st</sup> in West Des Moines. Key perspectives were offered by leaders in State government, a prominent Nobel Prize winning economist, and experts in the field of early childhood brain research.

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Max A. Phillips is the President of Qwest in Iowa and Chair of the Iowa Business Council, a non-profit, non-partisan, self-funded organization whose 24 members include the top executives of 20 of the largest businesses in the state, the three Regent university presidents, and Iowa's largest banking association. Collectively, these companies and institutions employ more than 180,000 Iowans and have made over \$25 billion worth of capital investments in the state.