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# Melissa Bandy: Spend tax dollars on children now and reap the rewards later

## READER'S VIEW EDUCATION

BY MELISSA BANDY - Idaho Statesman  
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As the nation and Idaho struggle through an economic crisis, a new administration and Congress gear up to make choices for our future. One significant choice our government can make to strengthen the economy is to invest in children. It is imperative that early childhood education becomes a priority in local and state investments and policy-making. Focusing our efforts on the early childhood experience, including high-quality, affordable and accessible child care will ensure the strength of Idaho today and in the future.

James Heckman of the University of Chicago and Arthur Rolnick of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minnesota are among some of our nation's top economists who agree that investment in early childhood education leads to a significant return, echoing research that proves that children who receive proper early childhood development and education in areas like language, motor skills, social skills and emotional support are less likely to drop out of school, commit crimes and require government support later in life.

The Idaho Association for the Education of Young Children strongly believes that our state cannot wait any longer to make a high-quality, well-financed system of early childhood education a priority in every community. Investments in the Child Care Block Grant and Head Start will support hard-working families, while saving future expenses for them and the nation. For years, early childhood education has not been adequately funded, yet costs to run and maintain child-care facilities and early learning programs have increased at a faster rate than inflation.

Although Idaho has not instituted cutbacks as of December 2008, funding for Idaho's Child Care Program (ICCP) is nominal compared with other states, and Idaho is one of only eight states that do not provide state funding for preschool programs serving 3- to 5-year-olds.

More grimly, since September, statistics from the 2-1-1 Idaho CareLine reflect a significant drop in calls from parents seeking referrals to child care and from child-care providers renewing their eligibility to provide affordable services to low-income parents.

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This is consistent with Idaho's recent increase in unemployment. The Idaho Department of Health and Welfare's child care assistance program reports a significant reduction in families who qualify due to recent jobs lost; parents and guardians are no longer eligible for services when unemployed. Families are making hard choices in this uncertain economy, and child care expenses perhaps are being allocated to other areas.

In Idaho, 60 percent of parents with children under the age of 6 are in the work force, and 32 percent of children under the age of 6 are living in low-income households; thus access to high-quality, affordable child care is essential to our state's economic recovery.

Investments in early childhood education would also keep and create jobs in early childhood. According to one study, by making it possible for parents to work, the licensed child-care sector allows Americans to earn more than \$100 billion annually. A thriving early childhood education field leads to three robust work forces: families who depend on child care to work; the early childhood work force that would continue providing early care and education; and our future work force, the children who are benefiting from quality child care and education today.

Supporting children is not just the right thing to do; it is one of the smartest investments we can make for our nation's future.

Melissa Bandy is board president-elect for the Idaho Association for the Education of Young Children.

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