

PRESCHOOL FUNDING

We must invest in young residents

It was good — and vitally important — to sit down with state Sen. Randy Richardville, R-Monroe, at the Jackson Coffee Co. last week.

We talked about the Senate's vote to eliminate the state's premier preschool effort, the Great Start School Readiness Program.

We hope he continues to listen to his constituents as the Legislature grapples with cutting \$1.7 billion from the state budget.

The Senate is trying to save money, but denying preschool funding to more than 30,000 4-year-olds statewide — including about 700 in Jackson County — ultimately will cost more than the \$103 million it saves.

Here's why:

Failing to prepare all children for school has long-term economic consequences.

Michigan and the nation have been suffering those dire consequences for decades, which is why our global economic competitors have raced past us when it comes to educational progress.

As the recession drags on, it's crucial that we examine what got us into this mess and look at new ways for getting ourselves out of it.

Luckily, there is much research to offer us some direction. It shows that investing in citizens when they are very young ultimately



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results in adults who contribute to the community and the workforce, rather than drain resources in the form of welfare and prison costs.

We know that 85 percent of brain development occurs during the first five years of life, yet government spends less on this age group than on any other.

These tight budget times are exactly why we need to scrutinize our old thinking and make sure we're investing taxpayer dollars wisely.

In making budget cuts, Michigan lawmakers must keep an eye on the prize — growing Michigan's economy.

We as a state must invest in our most valuable resource — human capital — from Day 1, the way other countries do.

Investing in early childhood programs is a strategic economic decision.

Study after study shows that if we don't, we'll be burdened

with the remedial needs of yet another ill-prepared generation of citizens and workers.

Michigan can no longer afford that!

Michigan must effectively mobilize every possible competitive resource to regain its long-term economic vitality.

We must invest in an array of programs that include education but also address motivation, social-emotional and physical well-being.

That's precisely what the Jackson County Great Start Collaborative, one of 55 collaboratives operating across the state, is working to do and why we are fighting so fiercely to restore funding for early childhood programs.

Funded by the Early Childhood Investment Corp., our mission is to create a coordinated system of local community resources to help Jackson families with children 5 and younger.

Early childhood programs are critical assets to economic development and quality of life.

They are firmly linked to the success of Michigan's economy.

An economic crisis is no time to be eliminating your greatest resource.

Lawmakers must preserve funding for early childhood programs.

— Sheri Butters is director of the Jackson County Great Start Collaborative.