

# All In

## *(Children Are Your Business)*

Today, with no war being fought on our soil, the United States of America faces a most serious threat to our national security, prosperity and health. This time, the challenge comes less from political enemies attacking our borders than from economic competitors who are suddenly and rapidly overtaking our productivity, depreciating our currency and weakening our global leadership and influence. Ironically, our vulnerability is rooted in our own failure to grow and sustain what was the greatest economic engine the world had ever known – the American workforce. The enduring recession, with its demoralizing high unemployment rate, masks the fact that American industry is retooling and ready again to hire workers. Only now, in order to thrive in the global marketplace, the work itself has changed and most of us are not qualified to master the technology, literacy or problem solving skills necessary to handle the tasks at hand.

Last week, the American Manufacturing Institute, the official policy and advocacy arm of our staple industries, reported that one-third of U.S. manufacturers cannot find qualified workers even since the recession that began in 2008. They blame the fact that 83% of American high school students are not proficient in math. Reading comprehension and communication scores are equally dismal. In fact, the emerging productivity gap between the leading western economies and the United States is a reflection of the widening education gap. Discouraging international disparities can be measured by early elementary school. McKinsey & Company, a nonpartisan American global research and consulting firm, estimates that if U.S. students had met the educational achievement levels of higher-performing nations between 1983 and 1998, America's GDP in 2008 could have been \$1.3 trillion to \$2.3 trillion higher. In other words, our existing education gap has created the equivalent of a permanent, deep recession. The 20% of U.S. children from low-income families are even more vulnerable. These 8 million young citizens, our future earners or dependents, currently run an 83% risk of failing to graduate high school on time, cutting their earning potential at least by half. Research from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) indicates that the United States will need 60% of its population to possess post-secondary degrees by 2025 to remain globally competitive. Right now, 30% of employed Americans hold four-year college degrees. Just as ominous, we all have heard the U.S. military leadership voice concern for our ability to muster an armed force capable of defending our nation's security. More than 200 generals and admirals, organized in support of high quality early childhood education as essential for our national defense, issued a report last year called "Mission Readiness." Their data reveal that fully 75% of young Americans, aged 17-24, were unfit to serve in uniform. In about equal thirds, the reasons for rejection included inability to pass the Armed Forces Qualification Test of basic knowledge on math, literacy and problem-solving, being overweight and physically unfit or being mentally or emotionally unfit.

When do opportunities begin to cement for children to grow up healthy, to be ready to learn and, ultimately, to contribute to their own well-being and to the stability of families, businesses

and social institutions in their community? Here, studies are unanimous. The title of a 2010 report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation gives away the answer: "Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters." Indeed, third grade reading scores predict high school graduation rates and, consequently, financial opportunities versus burdens for the next generation of American workers, voters, leaders and parents. The math is very simple. Each student who drops out of high school costs our society \$260,000 in lost earnings, taxes and productivity (much more actually, when you add in the extra financial and social costs of delinquency, prison, teenage parenting and publicly funded entitlements such as Medicaid, food stamps and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families). On the other side of our public decision equation, every class of 20 Kindergarten students that succeeds generates about \$320,000 in total earnings into early adulthood. Indeed, a newly completed 25-year study by Harvard researchers followed 11,500 children from all socioeconomic backgrounds who entered 79 Tennessee schools from 1985-1989 and were randomly assigned to classes. Here's what's worth pausing to digest: for every point increase in Kindergarten test scores, outcomes at age 25-27 years (the current age of the children studied) improved significantly with respect to annual income, college graduation and quality of college attended. Interestingly, test score differences in Kindergarten held up through third grade but then temporarily faded away almost entirely between grades 4-8. Thereafter, the performance differences first seen in Kindergarten reappeared and continued to diverge for the remaining school years and into young adulthood in both educational and financial outcomes. Experts theorize that in addition to the cognitive learning that takes place in school, children who receive solid foundations in social, emotional and behavioral development during the first years of life at home and in high quality early care and education before elementary school develop skills needed to master problem solving, cooperative learning, attention and self-regulation. These integrative skills are increasingly called upon to succeed in higher education, career advancement and collaboration.

How, then, can we explain why so many of our chances to thrive over a lifetime get set in a pretty certain direction during the first years of life? Educators point out that until third grade, most children are learning to read. After third grade, they must be reading to learn. The biology of child development is even more compelling. The net balance of a child's (and his or her parents') supportive and stressful experiences - social, emotional, mental and nutritional - from conception through about age 3 actually shapes the basic structure and expression of genes that control nerve pathways in the brain and central nervous system. The consequences can affect a child's blood sugar and fat metabolism, resistance to infection, heart rate and blood pressure reactivity, attention, behavior and learning. That's why the likelihood of eventually developing diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure, heart disease, learning and behavioral disabilities often gets sown during infancy and early childhood.

That's also exactly why we must invest in the health and development of children and their families in the first years of life. All children. As a community and as a nation, we cannot afford the cumulative expense of preventable disease, disability and dependency. The only certain way to improve outcomes, reduce costs, rebuild American prosperity and reinsure our personal and national security is to guarantee every child the essential building blocks for hope and

success. This we can and must accomplish through evidence-based and research-directed programs and policies that support the health of pregnant women, increase the chance of healthy full-term birth and early childhood development, help young children grow ready to learn, support families and communities to care for their young children and improve the safety, physical environment and economic development of neighborhoods where children play and learn.

And yes, we do have to concern ourselves with the healthy development of every child in our community. Aside from the moral decency of acknowledging that every child matters and has great potential, we know that children who remain disadvantaged, unhealthy and underachieving early in life will almost surely fail to thrive later, draining the treasury and, ultimately, the quality of life for all of us.

We also know that well-designed early childhood policies and programs work. They improve children's outcomes, prevent later problems and return economic benefit to society. From the Perry Preschool Project of the 1960's to the Chicago Child-Parent Center program of the current decade, early childhood program investments have achieved impressive reductions in numbers of children subsequently enrolled in special education classes, retained at grade level and becoming wards of the child welfare system. Respected economists from Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke to Nobel Prize winning professor James Heckman proclaim the financial returns of policies directed to promoting the health, development and early education of young children. Since special education costs \$10,000 per student per year above the cost of regular education and foster care costs \$32,000 per child annually, programs and policies that promote the healthy development of all children and families from the earliest points of intervention end up saving taxpayers an average of \$180,000 for every child served during the first eight years of life. And at a bargain outlay in our county, for example, of \$2400 per child per year to attend Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten (VPK) and \$5 per month per property taxpayer to fund the Children's Board of Hillsborough County to support and monitor the quality of primary prevention programs for children. Over the short term, we can save billions of dollars. Over the long-term, we can enrich ourselves by millions of futures.

My local professional hockey team ran a billboard campaign featuring the slogan "All In." The phrase effectively symbolized the commitment and the importance of every member of the team to the goal of victory. Likewise, all the motivational facts, science and solutions I just summarized will help children return America to a preeminent place of leadership among nations – though only if each and every citizen takes responsibility for considering the impact on and of children when making decisions about how to invest their human and financial capital. We simply cannot afford to fail. Now may be our last, best chance to align our moral compass with our net worth. Rise and shine America!