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Pre-kindergarten a crime deterrent step

August 29, 2010

Growing up, the start of the new school year was always an exciting time. There were new classrooms and new teachers, even some new friends. School was a stimulating opportunity to learn and to have fun.

While I have always enjoyed learning, unfortunately, about one in four Ohio students fails to graduate on time or drops out entirely. And from my perspective as a prosecutor, I'm concerned because this not only hurts their chances for personal success, it's also a concern for public safety.

Why is that? The research is clear that those who succeed academically and earn a high school degree are far less likely to become involved in the criminal justice system. Studies show high school dropouts are eight times more likely to be incarcerated than those who graduate.

I'm a firm believer in tough prosecution, but I also look for opportunities to prevent crime in the first place; prevention is far easier than dealing with the aftermath. One approach I support is investing in high quality pre-kindergarten, which is proven to increase graduation rates and cut crime.

A landmark study of a high-quality early childhood education program in our neighboring state of Michigan provides the following evidence: On a long-term study, researchers followed two groups of at-risk kids. One group attended the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program, a high-quality preschool program, the other did not.

By the age of 40, the children, now grown-up, who did not attend the preschool were four times more likely to have been arrested for drug felonies and twice as likely to be arrested for violent crimes.

The study also found children who attended the high-quality program were more likely to graduate from high school. Compared to children who did not attend the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program, the kids enrolled in the program were 44 percent more likely to graduate from high school.

Another study of Chicago's government-funded Child-Parent Centers found by the age of 18, at-risk kids not in the program were 70 percent more likely to have been arrested for a violent crime than kids from the same neighborhoods who attended.

Helping young children get a strong start to their schooling has long-term impacts for the entire community. If we can get kids interested in the learning process early in life, help start grade school well-prepared and graduate from high school, they are much less likely to end up becoming juvenile delinquents or adult criminals and much more likely to be successful in life.

Yet, despite the benefits of early learning, many kids in Ohio are unable to attend because of a lack of funding. Nationally, less than half of eligible 3- and 4-year-old children are served by Head Start. In Ohio, only 17 percent of all 3-year olds and 24 percent of all 4-year-olds were served by state funded pre-kindergarten, special education or Head Start.

Obviously, we're in a tight budget situation today, but the research is very clear that investing in early education for our youngest children also has long-term fiscal benefits for Ohio.

In the courtroom, I depend on the evidence if

I am going to be able to prove someone is guilty of a crime. Using evidence-based studies makes just as much sense. The Michigan study of those who attended the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program and the Chicago study of the Child-Parent Centers prove that prevention in the form of high quality early childhood education programs makes economical sense.

I am hopeful the Ohio General Assembly will work with the governor in building a strong early care and education system with increased funding for pre-kindergarten programs with quality standards. If we invest in high-quality early childhood education today, we can help more kids earn a diploma instead of jail time.

Martin Frantz is the prosecuting attorney in Wayne County, and president-elect for the Ohio Prosecuting Attorneys Association.