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Forum: Child well-being rating dips

By JUDY SAMELSON

It's not a great time to be a kid in Michigan. The annual national Kids Count report released by the Annie E. Casey Foundation bears grim testament to that fact. Michigan fell to 30th among the 50 states in child well-being, our lowest ranking in more than a decade. Last year, we were 27th.

Behind that ranking were some disturbing statistics:

- 19 percent of the state's children lived in poverty in 2008, up from 14 percent in 2000. (Those 2008 numbers are likely far worse now that we are in year two of what many are calling the Great Recession.)
- 31 percent of children lived in families where no adult had full-time, year-round employment, compared to 27 percent nationally.
- Michigan was 40th in the country for infant mortality, with nearly eight deaths per 1,000 live births; the national rate is 6.7 deaths per 1,000.

Those numbers should be a call to action, not just for our children, but for anyone who wants to see Michigan become great again.

Why? Because the research is brutally clear: Children who receive the proper physical, social, emotional and educational supports during the first 1,000 days of life are more likely to excel in school and become thriving adults.

Similarly, children who don't get those supports — things like prenatal care, home visits, quality child care, preschool and so on — are more likely to drain school resources by repeating grades and requiring expensive special education. They're also more likely to end up on welfare or in prison, both expensive propositions for society.

The greatest cost, however, comes when these children grow up. They are less likely to join the strong, flexible, high-tech workforce that Michigan needs to build its way out of this recession.

What should we as a state do about it? For one, we could choose to follow the Heckman Equation, created by Nobel Prize-winning University of Chicago economics Professor James Heckman.

The Heckman Equation goes: Public investment in disadvantaged families to provide equal access to early human development plus development of cognitive and social skills in children 0-5 plus ongoing quality education as children grow equals a more capable, productive and valuable workforce that pays dividends to America for generations to come.

Doesn't that sound exactly like what Michigan needs?

Of course it does. Investing in young children is quite simply the smartest investment we can make, which is why some companies are such strong backers of early childhood investment.

It's relatively new thinking, yes. But if we want to return Michigan to being a competitive, quality of life state where business and workers flourish, we'll embrace it.

Doing so, of course, will require lawmakers and candidates to fundamentally alter the way state government thinks about economic development.

Seeing Michigan drop precipitously in terms of child well-being, the Kids Count report should be a massive wake-up call. In answering that call, current and would-be lawmakers must answer a simple but frightening question: How low should Michigan fall before we act?

About the author: Judy Samelson is chief executive officer of the Early Childhood Investment Corporation, a public nonprofit building investment in enhanced delivery of early childhood programs.

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