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## **Samelson: Michigan must protect programs for young children**

*Preparing kids for school is economic development*

Last month, Gov. Rick Snyder delivered his State of the State address. Last week, the annual Kids Count in Michigan Data Book: The Education Connection delivered what amounts to a State of the State for children. The result can be summed up in a word: grim.

One in five Michigan children lives in poverty. But our youngest children - those between birth and 5 - have it even harder: One in four grows up poor.

The executive summary of the Kids Count report tells us why those numbers matter to Michigan as a whole: "Children living in economically insecure families have lower achievement levels and higher dropout rates than children in higher-income families. Many of the state's lifeline programs that help families weather economic downturns have been cut back or eliminated over the past 15 years."

This is a call to action. Yes, state government faces a \$1.8 billion deficit. Times are hard. But this is the state's future workforce we're talking about. Research is clear that poverty during childhood affects education and employment. With the state's budget season upon us, this is precisely the wrong time to make any further cuts to the support system for children in Michigan, and precisely the right time to change our thinking when it comes to making relatively small investments in things like preschool and quality child care for low-income kids.

Rather than view these investments as "nice" things to do, we need to begin viewing them for what they truly are: investments in our collective economic future. That view is shared by an increasing number of top business leaders in Michigan and nationally. Nobel Prize-winning University of Chicago economics professor James Heckman, for one, says that "to gain a more capable, productive and valuable workforce that pays dividends to America for generations to come," the nation needs to do three things:

- Invest in educational and development resources for disadvantaged families.

- Nurture early development of cognitive and social skills in children 0-5.
- Sustain those efforts with effective education through to adulthood.

That sentiment was echoed in Michigan by Dick DeVos, president of Amway, who in a recent commentary for the Grand Rapids Press said money is tight for state government but "helping families prepare their young children to be successful in school is one of the best investments we can make."

There's a very good reason business leaders favor early childhood programs: the economic return on investment is strong.

The truth is, kids who do well in school go on to become contributing, tax-paying adults, and the best way to ensure that the maximum number of children of all economic backgrounds do well in school is to give them the help they need up front and early on.

*Judy Y. Samelson is chief executive officer of Early Childhood Investment Corp., a public-private effort to promote programs for young children.*