

# CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS

June 05, 2011 8:00 PM

OTHER VOICES: Snyder's school ideas are great for state

## **Snyder's school ideas are great for state**

Education just got a lot better in Michigan. And that's because it's finally starting at the beginning.

Gov. Rick Snyder recently announced that he will consolidate a host of state early childhood services into an Office of Great Start-Early Childhood in order to create a coordinated vision and focus for public early childhood efforts in Michigan -- and ultimately make it easier for parents to get the help they need locally. The end result will be more school-ready children.

It's a bold and welcome change. Gone will be the antiquated notion that education is something that miraculously starts when a child enters kindergarten. In its place will be an educational system that acknowledges what research has been telling us to do for decades now -- start at birth, make sure kids are healthy, arm their parents with knowledge and help them with things like prenatal care, preschool and child care.

Do those things and more children will be able to keep up instead of falling behind, as they do so often now, beginning in kindergarten. Fewer kids will repeat grades or require special education. More will go on to graduate, which means fewer young adults in the criminal justice and welfare systems. Michigan's workforce and pool of taxpayers will deepen rather than dwindle. And perhaps most important of all -- those adults will go on to have children who also are more likely to succeed.

Change won't happen overnight, of course. It will take time for some people to embrace what the governor has called a P-20, or prenatal to post-secondary, approach to education. The governor himself acknowledged as much when he said, "This will not be an easy change. But it's not about simple change. It's about reinvention."

And the governor -- a pragmatic, facts-driven man -- clearly thinks reinvention is long overdue in Michigan based on the numbers: One-fifth of all children in Michigan live in poverty; only three of every 10 fourth-graders in Michigan can read proficiently; and less than 50 percent of Michigan students are proficient in writing across grades four, seven and 11.

As a result, only 16 percent of Michigan's high school students are college-ready based on their ACT scores, and hundreds of schools have no college-ready students at all. The governor called those

numbers scary, and I agree.

Turning them around requires starting at the beginning, in the first few years of life, when the brain is developing fastest. It also requires a public/private approach that understands that government can't -- and shouldn't -- do the job alone, which is where the Early Childhood Investment Corp. comes in.

As the governor said in his letter to lawmakers, the ECIC will partner with the new Office of Great Start-Early Childhood and do what it has been doing for six years now -- finding intersections for quality, accountability, efficiencies and innovation while increasing private sector investment in early childhood.

The governor's goal, of course, is to help children. But in helping children, we help ourselves. Research tells us that investments in early childhood development for disadvantaged children provide a 10 percent return to society through increased personal achievement and social productivity.

Gov. Snyder is an astute businessman. He's seen those "return on investment" numbers and has come to the realization that what we need to break the grip that poverty has on Michigan is a fundamental change in how we view children and their role in economic development.

Help them early when it matters most and they'll return the favor to Michigan tenfold down the line. It's just good business.

An Office of Great Start is a great start.

*David Hollister is senior vice president for strategic initiatives for the Prima Civitas Foundation and an executive committee member of the Early Childhood Investment Corp.*