

Op-Ed 2012

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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INVEST IN CHILDREN, STRENGTHEN OUR COMMUNITY THROUGH THE UNITED WAY CAMPAIGN

Back-to-school. The rhythm of the school year is deeply embedded in our cultural consciousness. Every fall brings with it the hope and unlimited possibilities of new beginnings: sharp pencils, empty notebooks, stiff shoes on squeaky linoleum floors.

But every adult who cares for a child knows that learning begins long before children come to school. Researchers from the University of Washington are finding out how a child's earliest experiences relate to their cognitive development. Fascinating studies show us that babies who hear more words—from moms, dads, caregivers—tend to use more words themselves as toddlers. The more language those babies hear at home, the more mature their brain responses are to that language, even when they only speak a couple of words themselves.

Early language skills—what babies learn-- predict reading abilities once those babies become school children. Third grade reading skills are closely correlated with high-school graduation. In fact, it has been shown that children who do not read at grade level in the third grade are four times more likely to drop out before high school graduation.

It is not a naive cliché to say that children are our future. Nobel-prize winning economist James Heckman's work shows that early childhood development heavily influences health, economic and social outcomes for individuals and society. The most economically efficient time to develop skills and social abilities are in a child's very early years. The impact of healthy cognitive, social and emotional growth is felt in the physical and economic health of whole communities for years to come.

The United Way of Whatcom County has identified early childhood as an area where community investment can benefit all of us. Last fall, for the first time ever, our United Way took a stand for early learning, brought a variety of groups together, and offered funding to address a specific area of need, encouraging diverse child care and service providers to work together to support increased access to early literacy experiences for all children.

Many of the school districts in Whatcom County have committed precious resources to early learning because they understand that what happens before kindergarten profoundly affects children's ability to succeed once they arrive in the K-12 system. Parents, preschools, family child care homes, our public libraries and many business leaders are working together to make high-quality early learning experiences available to all children in our county. This effort is called "P-3 alignment": knitting together what happens in the pre-kindergarten years (that's the "P") with what children learn through 3rd grade (that's the "3") and beyond.

Whatcom County has emerged as a leader in Washington state thanks to its creative approach to P-3 alignment. Look for exciting collaborations in your neighborhood—child care providers, preschools and public kindergarten using the same reading and writing assessment tools, for example. Preschool teachers and kindergarten teachers meeting, often for the first time, to share their expertise with each other.

Early learning and education that supports the healthy development of the whole child is important. We must remember that children don't get to vote, so it is our responsibility to speak on their behalf. Please speak up for children. Support their families and their learning. Consider investing in early childhood by contributing to United Way of Whatcom County's Community Impact Fund during the Fall Campaign. Because, as James Heckman says, the most important investment we can make is in our greatest natural resource—our children.

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United Way of Whatcom County has worked for over 50 years to improve lives by mobilizing individuals and organizations to create long-term change by investing in Education, Income and Health for all Whatcom County residents. To learn more about United Way of Whatcom County visit www.unitedwaywhatcom.org or check out their Facebook page at <http://www.facebook.com/UnitedWayWhatcom>

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