

# Investing in kids key to economic success

**O**ur future is inextricably tied to how we work to foster the health, well-being and education of the next generation of South Carolinians, because kids drive our future. National studies routinely report that South Carolina lags behind the rest of the country in overall child well-being and in reading and math achievement, and we know what we must do for our children to thrive and learn today, and for the Midlands and South Carolina to prosper in the future. The time to act is now.

What we invest in our youngest children comes back to us threefold. When we fully attend to the three domains of a child's development — cognitive, physical and social/emotional — children grow up into productive workers, responsible citizens and parents, and fully participating members of our society. When we fail to do this, we all pay a steep price: a diminished, insecure and less prosperous society. This was the message given by Upstate business leader and early childhood champion Minor Mickel Shaw at a recent forum for Columbia's top business leaders co-sponsored by the Greater Columbia Chamber of Commerce and the Institute for Child Success.

Recent research in brain science, conducted by Dr. Jack Shonkoff of Harvard Medical School and others, confirms that we must invest in our youngest children to reap the rewards of prosperity. We now know that early experiences affect the architecture of the developing brain. As the brain grows, the quality of the architecture establishes either a sturdy or a fragile foundation for all the development, learning and behavior that follows. Getting this right at the begin-



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ning of life is much better, and cheaper, than having to fix it later.

When early experiences are positive, the architecture of the brain can build itself from the bottom up in a healthy fashion. However, when a child's early experiences are negative because of abuse, neglect, poverty, maternal depression or other toxic stressors, the building process is thwarted, and the probability of poor educational, health and behavioral outcomes increases.

How do we create conditions in our communities that build healthy brain architecture by reducing and buffering exposure to toxic stress? Again, the research is clear: All children need to live in healthy relationships — with family members, caregivers and members of the broader community. Our businesses and policymakers must consider how their business and policy decisions affect children's ability to grow up in supportive, nurturing and economically stable communities.

The business community must recognize early childhood investment as a pressing concern, as it directly impacts the quality of our future workforce. The 21st century economy requires capable, creative, innovative and productive workers who are proficient in reading and math,

but also in the soft skills — communication, problem solving, teamwork, etc. — that our businesses need to thrive. The foundation for these soft skills is established in early childhood, and it is compromised by toxic stress, lack of access to quality care and services, or poor early education experiences. Expanding the availability and improving the quality of programs that serve young children — publicly or privately funded — is imperative for the success of our businesses and the prosperity of our state.

We must work together to ensure that all children in our state have the opportunities and supports they need for healthy brain development, from the time they come into the world. This will make learning in elementary school and beyond more efficient and more successful.

By creating opportunities for more young children to access high-quality care and education, improving economic environments for all families, encouraging better work-life balance and working to ensure that all children and families in South Carolina have access to the health care they need, we can realize a much brighter future for all South Carolinians. As a state, we have our diagnosis. Let's come together to provide the treatments we know will work.

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