

## SMART FROM THE START



A look at the way good early childhood education provides a lifetime of benefits

- **Monday:** The vital role of preschool in preparing a student for kindergarten
- **Tuesday:** A peek into the kindergarten screening process
- **Wednesday:** How early education success or failure translates to crime rates of the future
- **Thursday:** Drawing a link between early education and worker productivity
- **TODAY:** ANALYZING STATE AND LOCAL EFFORTS TO BOLSTER EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

# Pushing government to work for kids

## Lawmakers, advocates call for greater investment in early childhood programs

BY DARCIE MOORE  
*Times Record Staff*

### BRUNSWICK

Most advocates of promoting good early childhood development in Maine are familiar with a significant statistic: 85 percent of brain development occurs by age 3 and 90 percent by kindergarten.

Attorney General Steven Rowe, in a presentation titled "Invest Early in Maine's Future," explains that in the early years, neurological connections lay the foundation for intellec-



TROY R. BENNETT / THE TIMES RECORD

**REP. SEAN FAIRCLOTH**, D-Bangor, who just completed his 10th year as a legislator, said improving the early childhood experience remains his primary goal. He said society is falling down when it comes to early childhood intervention. "It's a dramatic problem," he said.

tual, emotional, social, moral and physical development. Communicating that message presents its own challenge.

Rep. Sean Faircloth, D-

Bangor, formerly worked in the child protective division of the attorney general's office, where he saw horrible child abuse cases. Later, as a drug prosecutor in the

same region, he saw a lot of the same children and families.

"I really felt that the attorney general's office and the child protective cops all do noble work, but you're kind of dealing with a problem after it's a disaster," Faircloth said.

Faircloth, who just completed his 10th year as a legislator, said improving the early childhood experience remains his primary goal. He said society is falling down when it comes to early childhood intervention. "It's a dramatic problem," he said.

Bob Davis, chairman of the local United Way board of directors, formerly chaired the Success by 6 council and agrees about the importance of early childhood intervention.

"If people understood the

*Please see KIDS, Page A4*

## KIDS

From Page A1

significance and the development of a child who's 2, 3, 4, 5 (years old) ... and the impact that society can have on that child, it is just enormous," he said. "We know through the studies that one-third of children come to school unprepared to learn."

Compounding the problem is that children of this age haven't had proper advocacy.

"I think that, to some extent, may be why very few dollars are allocated" to early childhood intervention, he said.

Faircloth chaired the Commission to Develop a Strategic Priorities Plan for Maine's Young Children, which was established last year through an amendment to "An Act to Ensure the Success of All Maine Families Through Early Care and Education," legislation sponsored by Faircloth.

The commission's task was to identify and implement best practices to increase the quality of child care services and address current limits on access to high-quality care based on a parent's ability to pay.

The commission completed a report in December 2007 which can be found at [www.maine.gov-images.informe.org/legis/opla/youngchildreport.pdf](http://www.maine.gov-images.informe.org/legis/opla/youngchildreport.pdf).

"We got some of our report passed into law this session," said Faircloth. "A lot of other

parts were not passed into law, so we made some good steps forward in the 2008 session but we've got a long way to go."

One of the important accomplishments is the permanent creation of the Children's Growth Council, which is charged with overseeing and improving a range of childhood development issues, and making sure legislators and business leaders are committed to working together.

The report's executive summary states that the commission "concluded that investment in quality early care and education will yield significant benefits," in the areas of brain development, state economy, state budget and return on investment. The rate of return on investment in early care and education is estimated to be at 16 percent, according to the summary.

Faircloth noted that child care workers lack adequate support from society and on average earn less hourly wages than animal trainers and pedicurists. According to the Maine Department of Labor, child care providers rank 596th out of 647 detailed occupations, with mean hourly wage of \$9.42 compared to manicurists and pedicurists at \$9.72 or animal trainers at \$15.55.

Other investments in early childhood education are similarly lacking. Out of roughly 46,000 children younger than 5 who need child care while their parents work, there are

only 28,400 licensed spaces available for them, leaving 40 percent of Maine's youngest children unserved by formal child care programs, according to the Governor's Economic Summit on Early Childhood presentation.

### Tough to be a teacher

Faircloth said there's a "Catch 22" for early childhood providers who want to become teachers. With the amount of hours they work and the cost of that education, it's very difficult to make that decision, said Faircloth.

"It is a gauge of society priorities, and it concerns me," said Faircloth. "I want to see the conditions improve."

There was movement in that direction with the creation of the first-ever Governor's Economic Summit on Early Childhood in November 2007.

Something else that may help improve the quality of early child education and care is a bill signed by Gov. John Baldacci April 23 that allows child care providers to unionize. According to a release from the office of House Speaker Glenn Cummings, who sponsored the bill, the measure allows the state to recognize the union's efforts on behalf of the 2,200 family child care providers in the state who care for nearly 17,000 children.

Dean Crocker, executive vice president of programs for the Maine Children's Alliance, is one advocate involved in public policy-making on behalf of children.

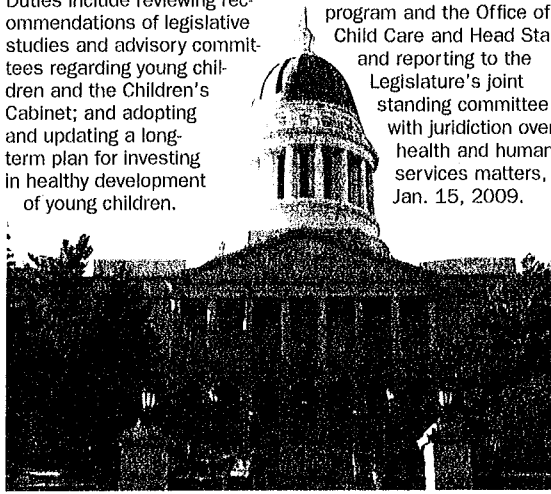
"We have for a long time thought that the way we spend a lot of our public dollars is not the best," he said. "We've advocated for public policy that focuses much more" on the research of learning and how it works. "We think that our most effective investment clearly is in young children."

# NEW LAW: 'AN ACT TO INVEST IN MAINE'S YOUNG CHILDREN'

The following items are key elements of a bill passed in December 2007 called "An Act To Invest in Maine's Young Children." The bill is based on the Commission to Develop a Strategic Priorities Plan for Maine's Young Children report, which was ordered by Gov. John Baldacci. The legislation was signed into law on April 23.

Establishes the Maine Children's Growth Council, for one year, contingent on receiving outside funding. In making initial appointments, the appointing authorities must consider persons who serve on the Children's Cabinet Task Force on Early Childhood. Duties include reviewing recommendations of legislative studies and advisory committees regarding young children and the Children's Cabinet; and adopting and updating a long-term plan for investing in healthy development of young children.

- Reduces the maximum interest on loans to quality child care projects to 3 percent.
- Requires the Department of Health and Human Services to offer voluntary universal home visiting for new families with children through age 5, as permitted by the availability of funds.
- Increases the maximum annual disbursement from the quality child care education and scholarship program from \$2,000 to \$3,000, for individuals.
- Requires DHHS to review unification of policies regarding child care subsidies granted by the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program and the Office of Child Care and Head Start, and reporting to the Legislature's joint standing committee with jurisdiction over health and human services matters, by Jan. 15, 2009.



SOURCES: Jane Orbeton, senior legislative analyst for the Maine Legislature, and the Web site [www.mainelegislature.org](http://www.mainelegislature.org).

Having reorganized the state's division of early childhood and the Department of Human Services, which brought all of the state's resources for children together, there is still a lot of work left, Crocker said. That's why the Maine Children's Alliance is advocating for a unified screening process to help identify the children at risk or who have disabilities early on.

The number of students identified as behaviorally handicapped doubles from age 4 to age 5, according to the report on Children's Mental Health released in March 2007. Those statistics were based on 2006 numbers.

"The increase indicates that we are just not identifying these students as early as we need to," and when it would make the most difference, Crocker said.

The Maine Children's Alliance has been working with the state and pediatricians to identify areas of practice that need improvement.

## Trouble from Washington

But federal funding cuts may take programs backwards. Crocker said the federal government will cut \$12 million in Medicaid funding for childhood development services through the Department of Education this fall.

And, the Head Start program would lose Medicaid family support services funds, which are a cornerstone of the program. "That is a major problem," Crocker said.

"Congress just went through the process of passing a stimulus package," to get money into the hands of families to increase activity in the economy, Crocker said. "At the same time, Congress is withdrawing an amount equal or larger ... it makes no sense."

The alliance advocates earned income tax credits to put money in the hands of low-income families, Crocker said.

## An optimist

"Overall, I think that more positive things are going on now than negative," Crocker said. "We have some challenges. We have this federal financing thing that we need to overcome, but on the other hand, we have a very clear commitment in this administration and in the Legislature, to early childhood."

Crocker said the way to ensure the health of children isn't complicated.

"What makes kids healthy is kids living in decent homes ... (with) decent food and clothing, parents that support their education and a community that invests in schools, provides a high-quality education programs."

Rowe said more people are becoming enlightened about the need for early childhood investment and the link to the economy, though he acknowledged that "when you make the investment, it requires some patience to see bigger payments," or returns.

"It doesn't start at the kindergarten level; it starts in the womb," Rowe said. "This is about changing the paradigm we live in. It matters how well that child does. We're all connected. We need to realize and value that the success of our community should not be measured by the most prosperous, but by the poorest."

"The bottom line in the cure is people at the local level who care about each other," Crocker said. "You can't replace that with government."

[dmoore@timesrecord.com](mailto:dmoore@timesrecord.com)