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KATHLEEN SEELEY, child care director for the Bath Area Family YMCA, says businesses should consider the qualities they look for in employees, and then think about whether the children in the community are learning those qualities. "Young children that are in an environment where healthy relationships can form, common sense says, as those children age, they're going to make better decisions," she said.

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
- **TODAY: DRAWING A LINK BETWEEN EARLY EDUCATION AND WORKER PRODUCTIVITY**
- **Friday:** Analyzing state and local efforts to bolster early childhood education

Bottom line on early learning: Investment yields dividends

BY SETH KOENIG
Times Record Staff

BATH

For the business community, investment in early childhood development is more than a feel-good donation or tax write-off.

An easy theory to grasp is that children well cared-for before school become advanced students during school — and exemplary employees in the work force after school. But it's a theory that's hard to pin down with firm statistics, as intuitive as it seems.

"There are very few long-term longitudinal studies that connect early experience to later outcomes when the subjects are of an age when they might be entering the job force," said Samuel Putnam, an associate professor of psychology at Bowdoin College who has studied toddler development and behavior.

But according to Jeff Sneddon, executive director for the Midcoast Council for Business Development and Planning (MCBDP), more immediate and clearcut returns are often sought by business owners when con-

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Kathleen Seeley
Bath Area Family YMCA

sidering where to spend their benevolent dollars.

"You can look at it from the payoff to the business community long term, but the question people ask is, 'Is there a benefit for now?'" he said.

Information provided to Sneddon and others at The Governor's Economic Summit on Early Childhood Nov. 29 and Nov. 30, 2007, in Rockland suggest the answer to that question is: "Yes."

Please see **LEARN**, Page A4

LEARN

From Page A1

Happy kids means happy parents

According to a Harris poll on child care, 51 percent of parents say it has been "extremely" or "very" difficult to find affordable care, while 44 percent said the same thing about high-quality care.

Of those, half say the lack of acceptable child care affected their ability "to do their job as well as they wanted to do it" and 43 percent say child care shortcomings "prevented them from taking a job they wanted."

A subsequent Harris poll estimated that worker absenteeism directly tied to child care problems cost U.S. businesses \$3 billion each year.

"With dual-income families — often with spouses who work in different cities from where they live — child care is an issue," said Jeffrey Jordan, deputy director of the Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority and former South Portland city manager. "And when you have a strong child care system in place, you have parents who can focus on their work."

The University of North Carolina's Abecedarian Project — which began tracking children in early education programs from their births between 1972 and 1977 through the age of 21 — listed the effects on the children's mothers as being pronounced.

"Mothers whose children participated in the program achieved higher educational and employment status than mothers whose children were not in the program," the project reported.

Happy parents draw happy industries

A 2006 study by Rob Grunewald and Arthur Rolnick of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis claims that investing in young children is a much more effective economic stimulator than the more conventional subsidies and tax-break packages.

"In the name of boosting the local economy and creating new jobs, virtually every state has tried to lure companies with public subsidies,"

wrote Grunewald and Rolnick in a commentary that appeared in the spring 2008 edition of "Communities & Banking," a publication of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston.

"But the case for the resulting bidding wars is short-sighted and fundamentally flawed," the researchers continued. "Even the apparent economic gains at state and local levels are suspect because, more often than not, subsidized companies have other reasons for relocation decisions and the public subsidy is just gravy."

The Maine Economic Growth Council claims that one of those other reasons for relocation decisions — and a big one — is a strong community focus on early childhood development. A strong child care system, the council argues, "attracts new industry looking for a stable, reliable work force and safer communities," according to information distributed during November's summit.

Jordan's MRRA is one of many local organizations focused on business attraction. The authority is charged with drawing companies to the 3,200-acre Brunswick Naval Air Station property, which will be turned over by the Navy for civilian redevelopment in 2011.

"(In) looking at opportunities for economic development, one of the keys that we heard from the public was access to day care — from the standpoint of both quality and affordability — near the work place," said Jordan. "It's interesting that child care is now part of the discussion of economic development."

The former top official in South Portland said that the city eventually realized the value of quality child care in its efforts to lure industrial tenants.

"When I was in South Portland, we went back into industrial zones to make child care a permitted use," he said. "We had people that said, 'Geez, you don't want to put children anywhere near industrial development.' But we had a woman who said, 'I'd like to put a child care facility into that industrial park.' We looked at it, and it made sense."

... and happy kids grow up to be happy employees

Samuel Putnam, associate professor of psychology at Bowdoin, admitted it's difficult to draw an exact line between how a young child is educated and how strong a worker that child will grow up to become. But he did say there are some behaviors that, if promoted early, could serve a child well when he or she moves on through life.

"It depends what kind of jobs we're talking about," he said. "For jobs that command kind of a 'cold heart,' that's going to demand a different kind of childhood experience than (jobs in) child care, for instance. But the things that really seem to forecast healthy development are attentional abilities and impulse control abilities."

In a nutshell, focus and patience are biggies for kids.

Dill Paiste is the president of the board of directors of the local Family Focus, a group that runs an early learning center in both Bath and Brunswick. He told an assembly of the Merrymeeting Board of Realtors recently that 18 percent of people in Maine's 18-to-24 age bracket are not in school or working.

"One of the reasons for that is that they entered school unprepared to learn" due to inadequate pre-kindergarten education, he said.

Kathleen Seeley is the child care director for the Bath Area Family YMCA, and said businesses should consider the qualities they look for in employees, and then think about whether the children in the community are learning those qualities.

"Young children that are in an environment where healthy relationships can form, common sense says, as those children age, they're going to make better decisions," she said. "Twenty years down the line, you can think about what kinds of decisions the children are going to be making. I think that speaks to the business community in the long run."

"When I'm looking at someone to hire (at the YMCA), I'm looking for the traits that I want to see in the children," Seeley continued. "Over 20 years, I think it's hard to line up, but I do believe that everything we're doing supports business in the long run and the economic vitality of our country."

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