

Save Early Head Start

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Gov. Sam Brownback wants to decrease the number of Kansas kids living in poverty and increase the number of fourth-graders reading at grade level. But those outstanding goals will be undermined if Brownback succeeds in eliminating \$11.3 million for Kansas Early Head Start for fiscal 2012. State lawmakers should spare this small but effective program.

While the federally funded Head Start program is aimed at 3-through 5-year-olds, the state-based Early Head Start program combines federal dollars with \$3.5 million a year from the multistate tobacco settlement to help 1,250 of the state's poorest children from before birth through age 3 with early childhood development, home visits, health care, nutrition education and more.

Wichita businessman and philanthropist Barry Downing has seen the results of Early Head Start in Wichita, where it partners with The Opportunity Project Early Learning Centers that he founded.

"I think it's one of the last things we should cut in the budget," Downing told The Eagle editorial board Thursday. "It's a support system for the most vulnerable young children and families we have in the state."

He said that at a time when brains are developing quickly, "the children benefit from having a high-quality educational environment," and that Early Head Start pays off in social skills, behavior and, when kids head to school, literacy and cognitive ability.

"Pre-K education for economically at-risk children is highly effective," Downing added, suggesting the child care assistance the governor proposes to offer some of the affected families would be an inadequate substitute.

Shannon Cotsoradis, president and CEO of Topeka-based Kansas Action for Children, can't think of a program that better fits Brownback's goals for the state's children.

"I think it's serving our poorest children who are at greatest risk" of becoming poor and illiterate as adults, she told the editorial board, noting the 13-year-old Kansas Early Head Start program has been a model nationally.

Amid the state's fiscal crisis, it's a further concern that Brownback would use \$6 million of the money now serving Early Head Start to create an untested literacy program, "Reading Roadmap." As state Sen. Jean Schodorf, R-Wichita, told Kansas Public Radio, "Any time you have a budget crisis where we're trying to cut millions and millions of dollars, I don't know how wise it is to start brand-new programs."

The elimination of Early Head Start would guaranteed that the state, school districts and communities pay more later for special education, social services, law enforcement and the other costs that follow at-risk kids through school and into adulthood.

Sen. Carolyn McGinn, R-Sedgwick, has a plan to move money around to restore the program's funding, as does the Kansas Children's Cabinet.

Kansans who've seen Early Head Start work miracles need to be heard in Topeka, so the rest of the Legislature will rescue the program from the budget ax.

— For the editorial board, Rhonda Holman

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