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Early education programs wise investment

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Our nation's economic future is uncertain. The poverty crisis that has gripped more than 16 million children threatens the very foundation of the American dream: the belief that our children, regardless of the circumstances of their birth, have the opportunity to grow up to be whatever they want. But for too many children in the United States, their futures are determined before they begin school.

In his State of the Union address, President Barack Obama called for increased access to high-quality, early childhood education. It is a step forward that allows us to compete in a world economy fueled by an increasingly knowledge-based workforce. The foundation for these fundamental skills is set in the early years. By preparing future generations for the challenges ahead, we create a path to a child's later academic success, increased domestic economic output and an end to the poverty crisis affecting nearly 50 million Americans.

As Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke put it: "Economically speaking, early childhood programs are a good investment, with inflation-adjusted annual rates of return on the funds dedicated to these programs estimated to reach 10 percent or higher. Very few alternative investments can promise that kind of return."

The call for universal pre-K for all 4-year-olds recognizes that school readiness gives children born into poverty an opportunity to experience social and economic mobility that otherwise may not be available for them. Getting an early start on learning helps at-risk children improve their chances to graduate from high school, obtain a higher education, purchase their own home, earn more over a lifetime and contribute to their community.

If we do not invest in our children early on, the outlook is grim: Children without access to quality early education programs start school with an 18-month disadvantage, and that gap continues to widen. By the time they are in fourth grade, they cannot do math or read at grade level. And the simple reality is that they are unlikely to catch up even with substantial investments in subsequent years.

The president laid out a clear and compelling road map to help American families, especially the nearly one in four children living in poverty. We anticipate Congress will act on recommendations in his 2014 budget released this week and create a more robust commitment to pre-K. Getting the job done and ensuring quality early education for every American child would be an investment that could add **\$2 trillion** to our national GDP in a generation, according to a report by The Brookings Institution.

But more money from Uncle Sam won't solve the problem on its own. Ultimately, our ability to close the achievement gap and make a truly meaningful investment in our kids can't be left to our government or the private sector alone. It's a shared responsibility in which corporate

America and leading nonprofit organizations play a key role.

Innovative models, such as the public-private partnerships run by Save the Children across 17 states, improve accountability and give infants, toddlers and preschoolers in underserved, poverty-stricken communities an equal chance to rise above their circumstances. Our results show the positive impact high-quality early learning programs can have on a child's success in school and life: 83 percent of disadvantaged 3-year-olds in our programs, who risked falling behind their peers, now score at or above the normal range for vocabulary acquisition and will enter school ready to learn.

An investment in early education can help ensure that more and more at-risk children have the tools they need to succeed. And if they can do well in school, we can minimize the income disparities that too often determine a child's future prospects, lifting the limits that unequal access has put on them and restoring our collective faith in the American dream.

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