



Brain gain from womb to tomb:

The true higher education

By Joel Jones

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As we celebrate the Week of the Young Child, we must incorporate into our parenting and schooling all the recent research about brain development. Technological advances have enabled scientists to monitor and measure brain development, beginning in the womb and continuing throughout life.

For centuries, philosophers, scholars and, of course, parents have proffered different theories about brain growth and development. I remember listening 60 years ago to my mother, who for many years ran her own what was then called nursery school, speculate about how young brains developed. Even back then, being an accomplished pianist, she used music to engage her 3-to-5-year-old children with numbers and words. Watching and listening to her and her colleagues, I developed a profound respect for early childhood educators. And educators they are. Appropriately recognized and rewarded, they are not.

Sadly, many nations rank ahead of us when assessed by the multiple factors used to measure “quality” early childhood. Several studies of the field (e.g., Early Childhood Systems: Transforming Early Learning) do show an increased public and legislative appreciation for the importance of early childhood education in many of our states, including Colorado – but we have a long way to go. One study, using internationally applicable benchmarks for quality early childhood care and education, ranked the United States 22nd out of 25 nations.

To approach all of this differently, my career has consisted of nearly 50 years in what is called “higher education,” a term predicated upon credentialing and ostensible importance – and a term which is perhaps a misnomer. I would suggest that the true field of “higher education” – measured by lifelong impact from womb to tomb – should be early childhood education. As Charlotte Brantley, a colleague of mine on the Governor’s Commission on Early Childhood Leadership and a nationally respected professional in early childhood, recently stated in legislative testimony about Senate Bill 213, the Public School Finance Act, “Research in human

brain development shows that the prenatal to age 5 period offers the highest potential for development, as well as the highest risks.”

“Highest potential” and “highest risks” in brain development – and, therefore, the imperative need for funding to elevate the preparation of the individuals and quality of the institutions involved with early-childhood education. What used to be seen as personalized babysitting must now be recognized as another level of higher education. Under the leadership of Colorado Lt. Gov. Joe Garcia and our executive director of Human Services, Reggie Bicha, the Commission on Early Childhood Leadership has worked diligently to elevate the requisite level of credentials for early-childhood deliverers and the quality criteria for licensing the early childhood schools.

When I first joined the commission three years ago, I was astounded, amazed and alarmed by the multiple funding streams and delivery agencies involved with early childhood education. The array of silos and complex network made higher education funding seem simple by comparison. However, under the experienced staff leadership of Jennifer Stedron, progress has been made in moving toward a more seamless system, hopefully transparent to and accessible by expectant parents and extended families.

We should celebrate the progress made at the state level, but our sense of comfort must be compromised by the data pertaining to poverty, which is a primary driver of at-risk early childhood. Colorado now leads the nation in the percentage of children transitioning into poverty. To bring the numbers closer to home, La Plata County has one of the highest percentages of uninsured children (16 percent) in the state, with 14 percent of our children living in poverty.

Numbers, though, must not be the simple conditioners of our thinking. At the county, state and national levels, we are making progress. At all levels, a growing number of leaders in the public and private sectors are joining parents (always the first teachers) in championing the lifelong, womb-to-tomb, importance of early childhood education.

At the local level, we are fortunate to have experienced leadership in early childhood education. Much of the research on early childhood stresses the importance of and interrelationship among the “four domains”: early learning, health care, mental health and family support. With Tamara Volz, executive director for the Early Childhood Council of La Plata County, and Charlotte Pirnat, executive director for Tri-County Head Start, we have two champions for improving the nature and nurture of early childhood in our region. They and their colleagues are striving diligently to break down the silos, simplify the networks and enable the appropriate agencies to work collaboratively in a system that enhances accessibility and accountability in the learning world of the young child.

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