



Every child should have opportunity to succeed

The latest census data reported that 16.7 percent of Westchester children under 5 years of age are living in poverty, up from 9.6 percent in 2005. This alarming revelation received little public attention as it was quickly overshadowed by the recent announcement that Westchester had retained its spot as the county with the highest property taxes in the nation. The implications of this dramatic jump in children's poverty in Westchester deserves careful thought and much more public discussion, particularly in light of the proposed cuts to child care, Early Step Forward, and Invest-In-Kids in the 2011 county budget.

It has been true, and remains so today, that the single most powerful predictor of outcomes for children is the income of the household in which they are born. In general, children from lower-income households do not do as well in school as their more affluent peers. Graduation rates are lower, college attendance less certain, lifetime earnings less.

While it is obvious that children do not choose the economic circumstances into which they are born, some favor withholding the very services that would effectively mitigate the devastating impacts of poverty, because of a perceived failure on the part of the parents or a belief that government should not play that role. General anxiety over the economy and concern over taxes are understandable as the struggling economy has spared very few households, even those previously quite comfortable. But the belief that what happens to other people's children does not impact the rest of us keeps us from embracing the very policies and investments that will strengthen our entire community and improve the situation for everyone. Economists estimate that child poverty costs the U.S. economy \$500 billion per year. Comparable figures in Westchester approach \$7.5 billion over 10 years.

Surprisingly perhaps, the strongest advocacy for increased spending for quality services for young children comes from national business groups such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and America's Partnership for Economic Success as well as leading economists such as Nobel winner James Heckman and Art Rolnick of the Minneapolis Reserve Bank. These leaders insist that our country's declining competitive advantage in the global economy will

only be reversed with more strategic investments in the early years.

If we can agree that whether a child is born into a high- or low-income household is, for each child, an act of luck and not of choice, and should not dictate the trajectory of his/her life, perhaps then we can embrace the proven community investments that mitigate the impacts of poverty hurting and holding back so many of our children. Home-visiting models such as the Nurse-Family Partnership and the Parent Home Child Program, as well as high quality Head Start and early care and education programs, all have impressive research documenting substantial short- and long-term benefits to children, parents and entire communities.

These programs do not replace what parents give to their own children. They do help parents of limited means become more self-sufficient financially. They do prepare children for educational and occupational success that propels them out of poverty and into the work force that Westchester will need to realize its goal to be "New York's Intellectual Capital."

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