

OPINION

Listen to the officers

When three local law enforcement leaders get together to push for an anti-crime measure, it's worth paying attention, and not just because they carry guns.

Durham Police Chief Jose Lopez, Durham Sheriff Worth Hill and Hillsborough Police Chief Clarence Birkhead held a press conference Monday to support a crime-fighting program that doesn't have anything to do with more officers or upgraded equipment.

They were touting an education program, the Early Learning Challenge Fund, which has passed the U.S. House and is now in the U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, of which North Carolina Sen. Kay Hagan is a member.

The Early Learning Fund would provide \$1 billion a year for eight years to states and localities for pre-school education programs.

From a crime-fighting aspect, "investing in our youth is a key strategy," Lopez said.

Meredith Wiley, spokeswoman for the organization that sponsored the event, emphasized that early learning programs such as Head Start, Smart Start and other

quality pre-kindergarten programs "offer constructive environments for kids, getting them off to a good start ... and on track for productive lives ..."

Research shows that the years before age 5 are key in development. Getting kids off to the right start can make a huge difference in later years. It can mean the difference between becoming a contributing member of society and getting on the wrong side of one of our law enforcement officers.

In Durham, the Partnership for Children has been working for 15 years to improve pre-school care and learning through national-leading programs such as Smart Start and More at Four. The Partnership has made impressive progress in moving children into high-quality day care. At the same time, its state funding has seen steady reductions. The Early Learning funds could help restore some of that funding.

Most in need are those kids whose families can't afford good quality pre-K. In Durham, some 45 percent of children, ages birth to five, live in low-income families. Those kids need a good start in life, and the Early Learning Challenge Fund would help them get it.