

Marsha Basloe: We need more than Band-Aids right now

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Scan television, surf the Web or open any newspaper and you'll know there is a profound restructuring going on in our country that is impacting the way we live and work.

There's no better time than a crisis to reexamine our priorities and begin to make true changes to impact our future on the local, state and national level. It is time that our rhetoric, our policies and our resources are aligned.

For decades, we have poured money into our educational systems alone trying to put Band-Aids on problems: remedial classes, tutoring and drop out or gang prevention programs aimed at students in middle and high schools. I'm not debating whether these programs are necessary. They are important; I started my career as a high school English teacher in public education and I directed a program for at-risk youth from middle school to graduation at a small college, but these intervention programs aimed at K-12 cannot be the only focus. If they are, we are only putting Band-Aids on these wounds.

We need to make sure more of our investment in education is focused on the very early years in life when the wound is a scratch and less expensive and quicker to mend. Durham Superintendant Carl Harris has been quoted many times as saying that the largest achievement gap exists on the first day of kindergarten. So why do we wait until the wounds of lack of academic achievement, self esteem, and motivation among our children are too deep? At this point, we try to repair the deep bleeding wounds with bandages, that are not even real Band-Aids but the less expensive white tape, and pray that time will heal the children who have been left behind academically, socially and emotionally.

The early childhood years are the years when the brain is wired to set a child's emotional, social and cognitive abilities. According to Dr. Jack Shankoff, Center of the Developing Child at Harvard University, babies are born "wired" to learn. From the time of conception to the first day of kindergarten, children's development rapidly progresses at a pace exceeding that of any subsequent stage of life.

High-quality early learning experiences during the infant and toddler years lay the foundation for later school success. High-quality learning experiences support early competence in language and cognitive development, cooperation with adults and the ability to initiate and sustain positive exchanges with peers.

Even cost-benefit analysis studies, such as "The Productivity Argument for Investing in Young Children" conducted by Nobel Laureate James Heckman from University of Chicago, found one of the greatest returns in public investments came from early care and education. The study found a \$12 return on every \$1 spent on early childhood education with the payoff being more high school and college graduates, who were more likely to be employed, earn more, pay taxes, and less likely to commit a crime.

The research and return on investment data is too compelling to ignore. Let's not walk away from it. Isn't it time to restructure where our resources are allocated to ensure the long-term investment in North Carolina rather than just instant gratifying, shorter term solutions in addressing the achievement gaps among disconnected youth?

Gov. Perdue plans to increase per pupil spending in public education. This will be a more expensive Band-Aid if we do not also increase our spending to have children ready to learn. If not, even the increase will not help to cover this wound.

Those who don't have voices -- young children and their families who need help most -- are hardest hit during a budget crisis. Will we be the voice for young children and make early childhood funding a priority for the long-term investment of our talent pool? Or will they come in last once again?

What we do today can either be another attempt to administer Band-Aids or we can make the harder choice to begin to clean the deep wound of our educational system.

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