Leveling the Playing Field:
The Value of Investing in Early Childhood
Practice, Policy, and Knowledge

Jessie Rasmussen, President, and Michael Burke, Vice President, Buffett Early Childhood Fund

Abstract
Buffett Early Childhood Fund and seven other national funders (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, George Kaiser Family Foundation, Irving Harris Foundation, J.B. and M.K. Pritzker Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and an anonymous foundation) seek to achieve better outcomes for vulnerable young children and their families by co-investing in early childhood practice, policy, and knowledge in their home states and across America. Built upon a variety of partnerships, this pan-philanthropic strategy seeks to: (1) create and sustain a coast-to-coast network of well-implemented, well-evaluated Educare schools; (2) better inform state and federal public policy decision-making through the Alliance for Early Success and the First Five Years Fund; and (3) deepen society's understanding of the science of early childhood by investing in the Harvard Center on the Developing Child, the work of Nobel Laureate in economics Dr. James Heckman, the FPG Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina, and other research institutions. Nebraska, the home state of the Buffett Early Childhood Fund, offers a compelling case study of how partnerships and integrated investments in practice, policy, and knowledge can shift the odds so more vulnerable families with infants, toddlers and preschoolers grow up healthy, eager to learn, ready for school and inspired with hope. Reflecting upon $130 million worth of investments from Buffett Early Childhood Fund alone, this paper concludes with 10 recommendations for the Commission’s consideration.

About the Authors
Jessie Rasmussen is president of the Buffett Early Childhood Fund. Under her leadership, the Omaha-based foundation invests in public education where America is most under-invested: the first five years of life, which are the first five years of learning. Early in her career, Jessie worked as an early childhood teacher, Nebraska state senator, state human services director in Nebraska and Iowa, and advocate. Michael Burke is Vice President at the foundation. Previously, Mike oversaw public affairs and communications for Ounce of Prevention Fund, Voices for Illinois Children, American Academy of Pediatrics, and two political campaigns.
The science is clear: What happens in the earliest months and years of life matters—a lot.

Brain research reveals that responsive, nurturing and stimulating environments impact the hard-wiring of the brain. The reciprocal interactions between parents and their babies, or the lack thereof, affects the number of synapses or neural connections in the brain. We also know from language studies that disparities between children of low income and children from resourced families are measurable as early as 18 months. Children living in circumstances of risk are likely to arrive at kindergarten already a year, if not more, behind their peers. If they start behind, they tend to stay behind; in fact, the gap widens across time. While it is possible to change this trajectory after children start school, affecting such change requires a great deal of time and expense. Far too often, we fail.

Studies also indicate that the more risk factors a child experiences, the greater the chance the child will experience developmental delays and require special education. Poverty plus other risk factors (e.g., being a single parent, being a parent with minimal education, experiencing domestic violence or untreated mental illness, etc.) results in environmentally induced delays. Additionally, recent studies show that children who experience the stress associated with poverty and other risk factors have poor health outcomes as adults, including a higher incidence of respiratory and heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, and even mental illness.

The good news is that multiple longitudinal studies indicate it is possible to buffer the negative impact of risk factors through quality early childhood interventions, especially when initiated in the very youngest years. Establishing a strong foundation in the first five years prepares children to be successful in school and later in life.

Access to quality early childhood experiences for children at risk is beneficial not only to the child, but also to society as a whole in terms of reduced costs of special education, remediation, juvenile justice, and health care. The overall economy benefits from a stronger, more productive workforce and from having more adults able to buy products and pay taxes, rather than needing the support of tax-supported public assistance.

Retired military leaders even assert that the national as well as economic security of our country is enhanced by having sufficient numbers of young adults able to meet the requirements of military service.

As Dr. James Heckman, the 2000 Nobel Laureate in economics from the University of Chicago, so aptly summarizes, “It is a rare public policy that promotes fairness and social justice and at the same time promotes productivity in the economy and in society at large. Investing in disadvantaged young children is such a policy.”

Unfortunately, our country’s investment in quality early childhood experiences for children at risk of failing in school because of environmental factors is not commensurate with the science. In fact, the system of early care and education in the United States is upside down. The children most in need of a high-quality early childhood program are least likely to have access to such a program. The children from resourced families whose parents provide stimulating and responsive environments are most likely to be in high-quality early care and education programs. About 500,000 children are born into poverty every year in America. Fewer than half of the children eligible for Head Start are able to access this comprehensive early childhood program designed to serve children living in families at or below 100 percent of poverty. An even smaller percentage of at risk children under the age of three—fewer than 4 percent—receive Early Head Start services. The federal child care assistance program has historically been a work support system (i.e., watching children while parents work) and not a system that nurtures early learning by providing the kind of quality care that offsets the adverse effects of multiple risk factors. While more and more states are investing in quality early childhood education and linking standards of quality to child care subsidies, the United States as a whole ranks 21 out of 34 industrialized countries in terms of public investments in quality early childhood education.
The science establishing the importance of the early years, coupled with the fact that far too many children living with adverse conditions do not have access to quality early care and education, led philanthropist Susie Buffett to establish the Buffett Early Childhood Fund (BECF). Early in her philanthropic career, after learning about the brain research and results of many early childhood studies, she recognized that waiting until kindergarten was too late to give children at risk the best opportunity to be successful in school. While she invests in K-12 education as well, Susie recognizes the continuum of learning begins at birth, and even before.

Thus, she dedicates a significant portion of her philanthropic resources to BECF investments to level the playing field for children at risk by promoting high-quality, birth-to-five services. Driven by science, BECF focuses on starting early in the youngest days, months and years of a child’s life; reaching the children experiencing the most risk factors (who have the potential to be the most “high-return” children); and promoting practice and policies that reflect the highest quality.

The work of the Buffett Early Childhood Fund (www.BuffettEarlyChildhoodFund.org) is organized around two key strategies: partnerships and parallel investments in practice, policy, and knowledge. The foundation believes that greater impact can be achieved through partnerships than through individual efforts.

The use of partnerships penetrates all aspects of BECF investments, both locally and nationally. Like-minded philanthropists (including Buffett Early Childhood Fund, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, George Kaiser Family Foundation, Irving Harris Foundation, J.B. and M.K. Pritzker Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and an anonymous foundation) invest collectively and work together across America to promote quality practices, smart public policies, and the development of knowledge—the three essential components for changing the life trajectories of a growing number of U.S. children living in poverty and adverse environments.
Given what the science reflects, this coalition of funders focuses on three key elements: (1) starting early, recognizing that development and learning begin at birth, and even before; (2) reaching the most at-risk children first, understanding that it is these children who can benefit the most and generate the greatest “societal returns” on our investments; and (3) promoting quality, because only quality-focused services and policies will be effective and achieve positive outcomes.

**Investments in Practice**

The Educare Learning Network (ELN)—a national network of 18 Educare schools with two more under construction and several more in development—was created through a strong partnership between the Ounce of Prevention Fund and Buffett Early Childhood Fund to demonstrate what can be achieved through quality early childhood programming and to provide an environment of continuous learning about effective practice. The Ounce, a Chicago-based organization now overseen by Dr. Diana Rauner, developed the Educare model, a state-of-the-art, full-day, year-round early childhood school designed to serve at-risk children from birth to 5 years.¹

The Ounce and BECF, in partnership with other national funders and local stakeholders in each community, collaborate in creating and sustaining the Educare Learning Network (www.EducareSchools.org) to demonstrate that it is possible to close, if not prevent, the achievement gap, which in reality is an opportunity gap rooted in the first five years. Each Educare school embraces a community’s most vulnerable children with programming and instructional support that develop early skills and nurture the strong parent-child relationships that create the foundation for successful learning. Educare can best be described through the four “Ps”:

- **Partnership:** Educare schools are grounded in partnerships involving local philanthropists, Head Start/Early Head Start providers and school leaders who are all dedicated to narrowing the achievement gap for children in their community. Funding streams from multiple sources are blended together to provide a single point of delivery of quality early care and development services. Most importantly, Educare schools are driven by authentic partnerships with parents and families.

- **Program:** Educare is a program based on the best of early education practices that provide a solid foundation for future learning, a foundation that sets up children for success in school and later in life. The program reflects high-quality standards regarding staff qualifications, class size, teacher-child ratios, continuity of care, parent engagement, continuous improvement through embedded professional development, and the intentional use of evidence-based curriculums focused on early literacy and numeracy, language development, and social-emotional development.

- **Place:** Educare schools are state-of-the-art spaces designed specifically to support quality early learning. The buildings make deliberate statements of value for the children and families who walk through the school doors, saying they deserve a great place to learn and grow. Portia Kennel, executive director of the Educare Learning Network and Educare’s “birth mother,” calls Educare “a beacon of hope for children and families in the community.” The schools also make bold statements of value for the professionals who work at Educare, reflecting the importance of the work.

---

¹ Ounce of Prevention Fund, Irving Harris Foundation and Chicago Public Schools opened the first Educare on Chicago’s south side in spring 2000. Lessons learned from the Ounce’s previous work with the Center for Successful Child Development (better known as the Beethoven Project) and new findings from research informed the development of the first Educare.
they do with young children and their families. In addition, each Educare school is a “showroom” where policymakers, business leaders, other practitioners, and other stakeholders can see “quality” and what works.

- **Platform:** Educare is not just about the 150-200 infants, toddlers and preschoolers served daily in each school. Educare is an intentional platform for change in both practice and policy impacting young children far beyond the walls of the Educare school. In addition to the “showroom” aspects of each Educare, effective practices and professional development opportunities are extended to the broader community of early care and education providers.

Each Educare offers unique features, tailored to meet the needs of young children and their families in the local community. For example, four Educare schools include or are directly adjacent to on-site health clinics (Educare Milwaukee, Educare Tulsa at Kendall-Whittier Elementary School, Educare Kansas City, and Educare Arizona). Plus, two Educare schools are linked to elementary schools with on-site health clinics (Educare Omaha at Kellom Elementary School and Educare Omaha at Indian Hill Elementary School). Many provide dental screening, additional nutrition efforts (e.g., “Educook” at Educare Omaha) and efforts to counter obesity. The two Educare schools that will open in the coming year also boast unique attributes. Educare New Orleans is part of a 52-acre, mixed-income redevelopment project in the Katrina-ravaged 7th Ward. In addition to more than 500 new homes and Educare, this site ultimately will include a new charter school, the K-8 Akili Academy. Educare Winnebago, 80 miles north of Omaha, will be the first Educare to serve a Native American community.

Every Educare school in the growing coast-to-coast Network is required to participate in a rigorous evaluation of program quality, teacher effectiveness and child outcomes. (Each Educare hires an “embedded local evaluation team” that works closely with the program and national evaluation partners at the FPG Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina.) The research shows Educare classrooms are of very high-quality, teacher effectiveness is strong, and children who experience Educare for a full five years arrive at elementary school performing on par with average kindergarteners, regardless of their socio-economic standing. Children who attend an Educare School also develop strong social skills, including self-confidence, persistence and methods to manage frustration. All of these abilities are strong predictors for later success in academics and in life. What’s more, early findings indicate the gains Educare children make hold as they move through elementary school.

As the Educare Learning Network moves into its second decade of existence, partners within the network are looking to serve as a catalyst to drive ever more meaningful change for thousands more children and families. Educare Learning Network members aim to extend Educare’s best practices more broadly, fuel the development of innovative approaches to
the work, leverage Educare’s role in shaping public policy decisions, and continue to bolster the scientific evidence base. To that end, in addition to the FPG Child Development Institute, the consortium of research institutions involved in Educare research include: University of Chicago, Munroe-Meyer Institute at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, Arizona State University, University of Southern Maine, University of Miami, University of Oklahoma, Anselm Center for Consultation and Evaluation, George Mason University, University of Maryland, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Juniper Gardens Children’s Project at University of Kansas, and the University of Washington. In short, the Educare Learning Network is a laboratory for additional research and learning that could shape the delivery of early care and education well into this century.

**Investments in Policy**

In addition to the Educare Learning Network, two sister organizations have been established to promote smart state and federal public policies affecting the youngest and most vulnerable children and their families. The Alliance for Early Success, overseen by Dr. Lisa Klein and based in Kansas City, focuses on improving policies within states. The First Five Years Fund, overseen by Kris Perry and based in Washington, D.C., focuses on improving federal policies.

- **Alliance for Early Success:** The Alliance for Early Success ([www.EarlySuccess.org](http://www.EarlySuccess.org)) is a catalyst for bringing state, national, and funding partners together to improve state policies for children, starting at birth and continuing through age eight years. Utilizing the funds from the eight national co-investors, the Alliance provides grants to approximately 20 national organizations to promote collaborative strategies for improving state policies that lead to better health, learning, and economic outcomes, especially for the most vulnerable young children. The Alliance curates the technical expertise of national organizations to improve state policies for young children. Technical assistance to states may come in the form of research that answers a key policy question, model legislation, best practices from other states, or advice on campaign strategies and communications. A small portion of most grants is allocated for Rapid Response, allowing grantees to either seize opportunities or prevent threats to policies or funding that could not be predicted when grantees develop their work plans. Support from the network of national grantees, including Rapid Response, is available to all 50 states. In a few select states, local advocates and early childhood leaders also receive grants to advance policy initiatives.

The Alliance promotes three policy priority areas essential for the healthy growth and development of young children: health, family support, and learning. These are grounded on a foundation of standards, assessment, and accountability. Evidence-based and innovative best practice policy options are provided in each of the policy areas. Political, social, and economic conditions determine the policy options states pursue at any given time. The Alliance also plays a convening role, hosting an annual meeting and a separate strategy meeting each year with a combination of grantees, partners, and investors. The meetings are by invitation-only and include sessions that run the gamut, from learning more about critical scientific research and messaging to tips on engaging business leaders in effective advocacy. Each meeting also gives participants the time to share strategies, discuss key policy issues and problem-solve with one another. In addition, the Alliance convenes and co-convenes other meetings that help advance the work.

The state-based work of the Alliance has played an instrumental role in promoting bipartisan interest in the importance of the early years. A total of 27 governors (as well as the mayor of the District of Columbia) referenced early care and education in their 2013 state of the state addresses—an increase from 22 governors in 2012 and 17 governors in 2011. These governors have stated that early care and education helps prepare young children for future educational success, provides crucial support for parents, and strengthens our nation’s economy. In 2013, 47 states and territories introduced more than 600 bills related to early learning and child care issues. The proposed legislation covered a wide range of
issues including improving quality in child care, early literacy, pre-k expansion, home visiting, governance, data systems, and workforce development.

- **First Five Years Fund**: The purpose of the First Five Years Fund ([www.ffyf.org](http://www.ffyf.org)) is to move the knowledge about the importance of early childhood education into wide scale practice. Through knowledge, data, advocacy, and collaboration, the First Five Years Fund helps elected officials, business leaders and philanthropists see early childhood education as a solution for dramatically improving education, health, social, and economic outcomes—in the short- and long-term. They also help these critical players understand how to craft policies, leverage existing funding, add new revenue, develop programs, and incentivize the most efficient and effective ways to invest in the development of America’s greatest resource: its children.

The First Five Years Fund works tirelessly to protect and expand quality birth-to-five early childhood education for children living in circumstances of risk. For example, the First Five Years Fund is playing a central role in promoting the historic expansion of early education outlined in President Obama’s 2013 State of the Union address and detailed in the Administration’s 2014 budget proposal.

During the recent recession years, the First Five Years Fund was actively engaged in minimizing cuts to federal programs supporting young children. Working in partnership with other national organizations, they were successful in reinstating federal cuts as well as expanding some services through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (stimulus funds) and most importantly, securing dedicated Race to the Top funds for states to establish cohesive, data-driven early childhood systems.

In partnership with other national organizations, First Five Years Fund also has developed a range of communication tools and resources for advocates to customize and use. These tools include powerful advocacy videos, handy info-graphics, and simple toolkits with customizable resources to help make the case for comprehensive investments in quality, birth-to-five early childhood education.

Additionally, First Five Years Fund has developed two major communication strategies—Invest in U.S. and Our Head Start.

  - **Invest in U.S.**: Invest in U.S. is an interactive multimedia exhibit designed to bring together policy-makers, journalists, business leaders, philanthropists, and the general public to learn the wisdom of investing in high-quality early learning programs. It is a traveling educational experience that introduces visitors to the scientific and economic research that makes the case for early learning, takes them inside high-quality programs, and explains the key policies and funding streams that help quality programs succeed. The Invest in U.S. exhibit consists of five stations that allow users to: learn about early brain development and early learning’s return on investment; visit a classroom to see the impact of well-trained teachers and caregivers; explore the benefits of several models highlighted as evidence-based programs; and take a quiz to understand key federal funding streams. The Invest in U.S. exhibit is available to travel to conferences and events.

  - **Our Head Start**: Our Head Start is an ongoing compilation of video testimonials by Head Start graduates who, as adults, are contributing and successful members of communities all across the country. The video testimonials are made by the Head Start graduates themselves and are a powerful statement about the success
of Head Start. As one hears the voices of bankers, doctors, teachers, nurses and authors, the message is clear: the real success of Head Start is not measured by an IQ test, but rather by the kind of people Head Start graduates become.

**Investments in Knowledge**

The third element of the three-part co-investment strategy is to support the dissemination of existing knowledge and promote the further development of knowledge regarding the early years of development.

Support for the Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University ([www.developingchild.harvard.edu](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu)), led by Dr. Jack Shonkoff, has promoted the wide-spread dissemination of brain research and the implications for practice and policy development. It has further supported the exploration of new frontiers of innovation in the ongoing search for identifying effective practices for achieving positive outcomes for children.

Likewise, support of Dr. James Heckman ([www.HeckmanEquation.org](http://www.HeckmanEquation.org)), a Nobel Laureate in Economics at the University of Chicago, has assisted in the further analysis of the potential return on investment of early childhood programs with his most recent focus on the health care costs incurred by adults who experienced adverse conditions in the early years of life with no intervention to buffer negative consequences.

In addition to supporting the knowledge development of nationally recognized researchers, investments are made in a national evaluation of the Educare schools described earlier in this paper. This national Educare evaluation, coordinated by local evaluators and the FPG Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina ([http://eln.fpg.edu](http://eln.fpg.edu)), will eventually involve about 3,500 children and their families. This significant study should provide a more contemporary assessment of the impact of quality birth-to-five early childhood services for vulnerable children and their families. Some of the Educare schools are also participating in a randomized control study to assess the effectiveness of Educare, comparing children who participate in Educare with those who do not. Two of the longest standing schools are also engaging in follow-up studies to learn how Educare graduates are doing in elementary schools. Thus far the results are promising, with Educare graduates achieving better grades, participating less in special education and retention, and testing within expected performance ranges in state assessments of reading and writing.

**Nebraska: A Case Study in Putting it All Together**

Nebraska, the home state of the Buffett Early Childhood Fund, offers a compelling example of the power of applying all three investment areas—practice, policy, and knowledge—to achieve better outcomes for children at risk through high-quality experiences in the first five years. About 60,000 infants, toddlers, and preschoolers in Nebraska are growing up at risk of failing school. Eleven counties account for 64 percent of all at-risk children between the ages of birth and 5 years. Those same counties account for 70 percent of the state’s high school dropouts.

Numerous organizations—including First Five Nebraska ([www.FirstFiveNebraska.org](http://www.FirstFiveNebraska.org)), Nebraska Children and Families Foundation ([www.NebraskaChildren.org](http://www.NebraskaChildren.org)), Nebraska’s Early Childhood Business Roundtable, and others—partner in various ways to galvanize public demand and push for needed changes.
In the past five years, the local partners working in Nebraska have:

- expanded funding for pre-K;
- institutionalized funding for at-risk four-year-olds through education state aid funding;
- established a $60 million dollar public-private endowment (called Sixpence Early Learning Fund) to create, support, and enhance birth-to-three services for children at risk;
- protected existing early childhood funding during the lean years of state cutting; and most recently
- passed legislation to expand the Sixpence endowment cash fund, initiate a quality rating and improvement system for child care (linking child care subsidy reimbursements to quality ratings), and raise the eligibility standard for the child care subsidy.

Any one of these advances would have been a major accomplishment in the conservative political climate of Nebraska. To achieve all of them, especially during a period of severe state budget constraints, is remarkable. The intentional use of the intersections between policy, practice, and knowledge played a major role in this success story. The advocates did the following:

- **Practice:** The Educare school in Omaha was used as a visible demonstration of what quality early learning looks like and what it can achieve. Educare hosted multiple individual and group tours for policy-makers—elected legislators, state school board members, other state administrators and spouses. (In Nebraska, the advocates believe in the power of pillow talk!) The tours were carefully organized to illustrate how quality programs partner with parents as well as provide early learning environments. It was readily apparent that seeing early learning in real life was far more powerful than descriptions through words alone. This site-based strategy was especially helpful in explaining early learning for infants and toddlers. Additionally, the data from Educare was particularly effective in demonstrating the positive outcomes of quality programs, including the findings that show children of low-income arriving at kindergarten on par with their peers. As Nebraska advocates know, data specific to the kids in your own state is far more powerful than data from a study done in another state.

- **Knowledge:** The Nebraska advocates utilized the brain research to illustrate the importance of the early years. They hosted Dr. Jack Shonkoff multiple times across the past several years, inviting him to speak to a broad base of audiences: superintendents, state senators, governors, business leaders and state administrators. Materials developed by the Center for the Developing Child at Harvard were used to deepen the fundamental understanding of brain research and its implications for early development. Dr. James Heckman also presented, hosted by the Nebraska Chamber of Commerce, to share the return on investment data. He also emphasized the importance of focusing on essential life skills as well as cognitive skills. The expertise of Dr. Helen Raikes, a principal investigator in the Early Head Start evaluation who happens to live in Nebraska, was another credible scientific voice who testified in public hearings for several legislative bills. In addition, Dr. Samuel Meisels, the incoming and founding president of the newly created Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska, addressed policymakers plus hundreds of Nebraskans from all walks of life at the Educare Lincoln grand opening and Holland Lecture Series in Omaha.

- **Policy:** The Nebraska advocates took full advantage of resources developed by the First Five Years Fund and the Alliance for Early Success. The Invest in U.S. exhibit was tailored to provide Nebraska data and displayed across a week in multiple settings: state conferences, the rotunda of the State Capitol, and the Omaha Chamber of Commerce. The FFYF toolkit was helpful in developing letters to editors and messages that would resonate with the general public. Alliance grantees were a significant part of the boots on the ground. Fight Crime, Invest in Kids rallied police chiefs,
sheriffs and county attorneys to write letters to newspapers and hold press conferences. Likewise, Mission Readiness brought in the voices of retired generals living in Nebraska to speak about the urgency of investing in the early years as part of our national security. With the guidance of advocacy peers in Alliance states, Nebraska also established an Early Childhood Business Roundtable that was highly effective in broadening the base of support for early childhood.

The bottom line: Nebraska has been successful in implementing smart public policies because it used the resources developed through the three major investment areas—practice, policy, and knowledge—supported by BECF and its philanthropic partners. Even more importantly, the early childhood leaders in Nebraska understand the inter-related nature of practice, policy, and knowledge.

Practice that is not driven by knowledge risks being ineffective. Knowledge without application to practice is of little value. And policy that is developed without being informed by practice and knowledge is counter-productive. It is equally important to recognize the reciprocal relationship between these three components. In short, one feeds the other. For example, the standards of effective practices at Educare, which were driven by research, are now reflected in the standards required of the Sixpence endowment grantees. In turn, the evaluation of the Sixpence endowment programs has created new knowledge, which is now influencing practices in Educare. Continued investments in all three “legs of the stool”—practice, policy, and knowledge—and the intentional use of the inter-relatedness of these elements to further expand practice, policy, and knowledge will be essential to achieving the goal of all children receiving strong foundations in their first months and years of life.

**Recommendations to the Commissioners:**

Based on the Buffett Early Childhood Fund’s experience and lessons learned investing nearly $130 million to date in local communities, at the state level and federally, we share the following recommendations with the Commissioners for their thoughtful consideration:

1. **Follow the science.** Decades of research have been conducted, the findings are clear, and there is no dispute about the overall conclusions. Children are born learning. What they experience from their earliest days, weeks, months, and years will shape who they will become and how successful they will be in school, in work, in life.

2. **Start early—at birth and even before—and start with those most at risk.** If you are looking for the biggest societal return on investments in education and health, invest in the first five years. As Dr. James Heckman has noted, especially in an era of tight government budgets, the real question is how to use available funds wisely? “The best evidence,” Dr. Heckman says, “supports the policy prescription: invest in the very young and improve basic learning and socialization skills.”

3. **Emphasize a holistic approach.** Cognitive development, social-emotional development and physical development cannot be separated. As Dr. Jack Shonkoff has stated and written repeatedly, these skills are highly inter-related and must be addressed comprehensively.

4. **Don’t forget about families.** We’ve all heard the phrase that “parents are a child’s first and most important teacher,” which is true. But the statement is repeated so often now that it’s beginning to ring with a certain hollowness. We know parents and other family members are essential to nurturing young children and sustaining them as they grow older. But, as a field, we don’t yet know enough about how best to work with families and how to measure our progress. In many ways, this work is a new frontier.

5. **Pay greater attention to the workforce.** We expect miracles from the early childhood workforce; but the fact is the work—bolstering parent-child relationships, changing a child’s life trajectory—is no easy task. Plus, broadly speaking, education and training programs producing new early childhood workers are not preparing the workforce the field.
needs. What’s more, staff turnover rates in the early childhood workforce are among the highest of any profession tracked by the U.S. Department of Labor. Wages barely exceed poverty levels.

6. **Forge and maximize partnerships.** No societal problem is small enough for any one of us to solve alone and we are more effective when we act in a unified fashion rather than acting like the Lone Ranger. Too often, well-intentioned government programs are structured in silos. Similarly, well-intentioned philanthropic efforts unfold in isolation. Public-private partnership, in which each stakeholder sacrifices something to gain something greater, will drive our attempt to reach scale with promising solutions.

7. **Cultivate unexpected champions.** Until quite recently, the early childhood field spent a lot of time singing to the choir. We have witnessed impressive gains by forging new relationships with unexpected champions from business, law enforcement, the military and other fields of expertise. New efforts to marshal spiritual leaders as well as grandparents offer great promise.

8. **Invest in quality.** If an intervention or policy is not focused on improving quality—or is focused on expanding access at the expense of quality—it is not worth investing in. This old argument within the field appears to have died down; but, too often and for a variety of reasons, policies are still promoted that ignore quality.

9. **Take the wide view.** At the Buffett Early Childhood Fund, we recognize the pioneers who came before and those working outside of our circle to the same end. We all must find ways to work together.

10. **Take the long view.** Change does not come quickly. At Buffett Early Childhood Fund, our investment strategy is the philanthropic equivalent of a “buy and hold” approach: Look for talented partners, support strategies that offer great value and suggest big returns, and invest for the long-term. To paraphrase early childhood visionary (and BECF consultant) Dr. Joan Lombardi: America created an education system in the 19th century. Our country then created a higher education system in the 20th century. Here, still in the dawn of the 21st century, it is our opportunity to create an early childhood system—focused on quality, connecting in seamless ways, comprehensive in its scope.

**References**


