

How Do I Respond?

I don't believe early childhood programming works.

Research demonstrates that high-quality early education programs help reduce the need for special education and remediation, lower criminal justice costs, improve health outcomes, and increase family self-sufficiency and productivity. The Committee for Economic Development, one of the foremost business policy organizations in the country, has made investment in early education one of its top priorities and sees early education programs as a cost-effective investment. Its leaders have said that, “Investing in early childhood education is a fiscally responsible way to reduce deficits and produce big gains for children and taxpayers. That’s why it’s time we talk about protecting our current investments and, yes, increasing funding, in early childhood education.”

This is a tough year and we will have to make difficult choices.

In this time of cutting budgets and determining our priorities, it is essential that we make investments that will support and expand our economy. Investment in early care and education is both a short and long-term economic development strategy. In the short term, it provides care so that parents can work. In the long-term, it assures that we are educating the workers of the future.

I believe that both federal and state governments need to find inefficiencies in all programs, including these, and to make hard choices throughout the budget to achieve deficit reduction and limit the public debt. However, these programs are demonstrably so enormously effective and important, and the shortfalls of access are so large that, even after any and all inefficiencies are remedied, the nation surely would be better off with increased funding for these programs.

According to research by Nobel Laureate economist James Heckman, it’s one of the most cost efficient approaches to increasing education, health and economic outcomes and lowering the costs of remediation and social dependence. During the course of their lives, children who experience quality early learning programs will be healthier, more self-sufficient and less likely to enter the criminal justice system. Those real cost savings add up to as much as a 10 percent annual economic return—a solid performance in any market.

Early childhood education reduces deficits and creates surpluses. Birth-to-five early childhood education for disadvantaged children more than pays for itself by preventing the achievement gap and producing better outcomes in education, health, personal productivity, and economic vitality.

I refuse to raise taxes. I campaigned on this.

While I would be willing to have you raise my taxes in an effort to protect investments in our state’s infrastructure, I think you can balance the budget while still protecting the future economic development of our state. Think about what is necessary to keep businesses coming to North Carolina and expanding their companies. They need to know that there is quality child care for their employees and that we are providing a strong education system for its future workers. If you cut things like child care and education, you are eliminating a key reason for business investment in this state. You’re telling them to go to places like Mississippi and Alabama where everything is cheaper and the workers have limited education and skills. That does not make good sense.

Short-term costs are more than offset by immediate and long-term benefits. If pre-k programs for the most at-risk children were implemented this year, state government budget gains would surpass costs in over 80% of states in 10 years or less and the vast majority would reach surplus by 2020. (Economic Policy Institute)

Do you think we should cut schools before we cut your program?

I think you have to invest in both. If you don't make the investments in early education though, then your investment in schools won't matter. 85% of the brain is formed in the first 3 years of life. All the research says that those are the years that are critical to a child's future development. If you don't assure they are getting the right development in those early years, it won't matter that you have the very best schools. If children start behind, they stay behind for the rest of their lives. We can't afford that.

Quality early childhood development is essential for reducing social costs. Gaping holes in early childhood development among disadvantaged children create the achievement gap in our schools, the growing population of unskilled workers, the increasing demand for public support, and increased government costs due to poor outcomes in education, health and personal productivity.

We are required by law to fund kids to go to school. We can't afford any "extras" this year.

Early education is not an extra. By providing quality child care, you are making sure that parents are able to work. More than 60% of young children are in families where both parents work. Child care is a necessity – not an extra. Moreover, you can't just decide you want to stop educating children one year and then start again another year. It just doesn't work like that. You can't eliminate schools for a year and you can't eliminate early education for a year either. It is a part of the economic infrastructure of our state.

You also need to consider how many jobs you'll be eliminating if you eliminate child care and preschool funding from the budget. That translates into over 500 jobs and 125 small businesses in Davidson County. How does it make sense in the current recession to eliminate that many jobs and small businesses? What about working parents who won't be able to work because they don't have access to funds that help pay for high quality child care when they cannot afford to do so? Our economy isn't going to come back if you're cutting jobs versus getting people back to work.

The studies I've read say this doesn't make much difference after a few years. What's the point in spending so much money on something that isn't going to make a difference once a kid reaches high school?

I don't know what studies you're reading. I've got studies I can give you from some of the top universities in the country that say it does matter. I've got studies from a Nobel laureate economist that says it matters more than the money we spend on K-12, on vocational education, on universities and even on prisons. If we get children the right education in those early years, they will grow up to be productive members of society. They are less likely to end up in jail, are

more likely to go to college, get a good job and pay taxes to keep our state moving forward. Let me know if you'd like to see copies of those studies and I'll be happy to get them for you.

I don't believe government should be telling families what to do with their kids.

We're not telling parents what to do. We're giving them choices. If they have to put their child in child care, we are giving them lots of choices between church-based, nonprofit and profit programs, part-day, full-day, whatever they need so they can work. We are giving them the security of knowing that, while they're at work, their child is in a safe, healthy place where they will be happy and can learn. They can come home at night after a hard day at work and know that their child is happy and has had a good day. You can't replace that kind of peace of mind.

Parents should be staying home with their kids.

That's a nice idea but it's not the reality these days. Most parents can't afford to stay home with their kids. Most parents have to work in order to be able to pay the rent or mortgage, pay for health care and food for their families and put a little away for college when their kids grow up. It's not a choice.

Parents need to make their own choices about their kids.

I absolutely agree and we are giving them choices. Before Smart Start came along, parents didn't have many choices. Now they can choose so many different places for their children. They can take them to a church program, a school program, a program in their neighborhood – whatever they want. Don't take that choice away from them.

Let's just cut taxes so people can have the money themselves to spend however they want on their kids.

Your tax cuts are only going to translate into a little bit of money for families. And what are they going to spend it on? If you eliminate Smart Start, so many child care programs are going to go out of business and parents won't have much to choose from in terms of a place for their kids. They'll have to pick whatever is left and I guarantee you that those places that are left will go up on their rates and probably will worry more about their profit margin and less about what is best for children.

Why are we subsidizing small businesses?

In essence, we aren't subsidizing small businesses, we're subsidizing families. We're making child care more affordable so that they can put their children in a safe, healthy, educational place while they work.

Isn't this just another welfare program?

It's a jobs program. We are making sure parents can keep working and training the future workers of tomorrow. Smart Start funds are being utilized to ensure appropriate things are happening for children. Funds are used as an incentive to ensure children's critical needs are being met.