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## Our View: Early education is a proven investment

For a group of business leaders, early education represents a sound investment in tomorrow's work force.

The CEOs are right. It's time for the state to be a partner — albeit a limited and, for now, nonpaying partner — in early education.

The Idaho Business Coalition for Education Excellence, representing some 75 executives from large and small businesses, endorses a bill to allow school districts to offer educational programs to 4-year-olds. The Senate Education Committee will consider the bill this afternoon.

Everything would be voluntary. No district would be required to offer pre-kindergarten. No parents would be required to send their 4-year-olds to school.

And no state dollars could go into pre-k programs — a modest step, when more than 40 other states put money into pre-kindergarten programs.

But it's a start, and the CEOs make a bottom-line case for providing early childhood education for low-income families that cannot afford private programs:

- A quality preschool program more than doubles the chance of a kindergartner arriving at school ready to learn.
- Children who attend a preschool program are 46 percent more likely to graduate from high school.
- Preschool graduates earn \$228,000 more in lifetime earnings.

The rate of return, in the language of the CEO, is astounding. The public sector eventually receives \$7.16 for every dollar put into early education.

Yet for all these advantages, the Legislature has resisted. A bill to advance a voluntary preschool system — and legitimize, in state law, the kind of efforts already under way in some school districts — went nowhere in the Senate last year. This year's version, Senate Bill 1079, has the unanimous support of a legislative task force that studied the issue last summer, and a bipartisan slate of 14 co-sponsors. Ray Flachbart, the Blue Cross of Idaho president who chairs the coalition's early childhood committee, finds encouragement in the task force's support. So do we. But we recognize two huge hurdles.

The first obstacle is cultural. Some lawmakers — particularly in conservative, rural districts — believe preschoolers learn best in a home environment. They may be unlikely to change their opinions at the behest of a group such as the business coalition, which gets maybe 65 percent to 70 percent of its membership from Treasure Valley employers. Flachbart tries to strike a delicate balance; he acknowledges a role for engaged parents, "(but) trained educators can help as well."

The second obstacle is costs. That's State School Superintendent Tom Luna's stated concern. During the 2006 campaign, Luna said he'd prefer investing in early education over high school remediation. But Luna is leery of mandatory preschool programs, which would increase the demand for public school dollars.

That's a valid point — for later in the process. It's not realistic to expect schools to take on an extra year of education with the same number of state dollars. It's also unrealistic to expect preschool programs to flourish indefinitely on a patchwork of federal grants and other dollars.

If Idaho is to develop a preschool system, as it should, it's going to cost money. That will require support from taxpayers, including business leaders. This Legislature isn't prepared to take that step. The Senate Education Committee rejected a separate proposal Monday to fund some preschool pilot programs, partly because members didn't want to undercut the voluntary approach in Senate Bill 1079.

Fair enough. But this Legislature can still send a strong message about the need to start building a pre-kindergarten system. Passing Senate Bill 1079 would do this.