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## **Why Businesses Should See Early Childhood Development as a Smart Investment**

In an increasingly competitive global economy, both job-specific skills and “soft skills” such as resilience, teamwork and creativity, are fundamental. Research shows that the development of these skills begins during the first few years of childhood. Last week, the Center for Universal Education at Brookings (CUE), the [Global Business Coalition for Education](#) (GBC-Education), and [Ready Nation/America’s Edge](#) hosted a webinar on the business case for early childhood development. The webinar kicked-off a new partnership between CUE and GBC-Education—Business for Early Childhood Development (Biz4ECD). This partnership aims to raise awareness of the economic and social benefits of early childhood development (ECD) among the business community and accelerate the involvement of business in influencing developing-country ECD policies, programs and investments at the corporate, national and global levels. The webinar included an impressive lineup of speakers who presented evidence on why investing in ECD is important and how businesses can and are making a difference.

Dr. Paul Gertler, Li Ka Shing professor at the University of California, Berkeley, set the stage. He noted that only 40 percent of pregnant women have access to acceptable ante-natal care, and that 1 in 4 children in developing countries are stunted, conditions known to impair the cognitive development of children. [Merely 17 percent](#) of preschool age children are enrolled in early childhood education programs. Gertler then presented the scientific, economic and equity arguments for early childhood investment:

- 1 **The scientific argument:** the first 24 months of life are when the brain forms the most synapses. This is the most important time to stimulate and nourish brain development.
- 2 **The economic argument:** investing early yields a much higher return on investment than any other time in the life-cycle.
- 3 **The equity argument:** early investment levels the playing field and prevents the emergence of large inequalities (like the number of words spoken). As a result, poor children benefit the most from early childhood interventions.

Mr. Roy Bostock, vice chairman of Delta Airlines, presented a compelling business case for ECD investment. By 2020, [two-thirds of jobs](#) will require more than a high school diploma. In order to obtain a bachelor’s or master’s degree, students must of course first graduate from high school. Bostock cited evidence from the United States that shows the likelihood of graduating from high school increases fourfold if children read at grade level by third grade, while chances of reading at grade level are doubled if children start school ready to learn. Quality early childhood interventions are the key to preparing children who are ready to learn. Great strides have been made in the United States business community to support ECD. Almost every state in the country has active business roundtables and chambers supporting early childhood. Other ways that businesses serve as advocates for ECD include: sharing information with employees, contributing time, resources, and volunteers to

local organizations, talking to the media, and communicating with elected and appointed officials and encouraging their local business organizations to develop formal positions and host events on the benefits of ECD programs. Finally, the business community can sponsor scholarship opportunities as well as support the development of tools for ECD teaching and training.

Mr. Stephan Turnipseed, president emeritus and executive director of strategic partnerships at [LEGO Education](#), gave concrete examples of his organization's commitment to ECD around the world. LEGO Education engages in ECD in three ways: philanthropy, corporate social responsibility (CSR) and public-private partnerships. For example, LEGO's philanthropic work supports programs in East Africa, Ukraine and China through teacher education, project coordination, products and funding. Its CSR work includes supporting local schools near its plant in Connecticut. Finally, they are engaged in a public-private partnership, between LEGO A/S and Billund municipal government in Denmark, in which they conduct research on ECD, learning and creativity.

We concluded the seminar armed with solid scientific and program evidence and heartened by successful examples of business engagement in ECD. Rarely do the business, economic and equity arguments all point in the same direction as they do for ECD. Through our relationship with GBC-Education—Biz4ECD—we hope to catalyze the global business community to organize around advocating for ECD and to harness its power to make a difference in this often neglected area of public policy.