



ISLAND COMMENTARY

Furlough Fridays fail to invest in kids

By Dawn Webster

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Oct 22, 2009

Recently, I heard the case being made for why we should invest in early childhood education for our children.

One speaker said we should love other people's children the way we love our own. A call to the better angels of our nature. Nice, but not something that we can necessarily count on.

It was self-described "flinty-hearted" executives like Mark Fukunaga of Servco Pacific and Rob Dugger, chairman of Partnership for America's Economic Success, who made the compelling case for why it is insane to even think of cutting 17 school days, if we truly understand how essential early childhood education is to the state's economic success.

We should listen when someone like Dugger, managing partner of Hanover Investment Group, a private equity and investment analysis company, says that "a society that does not invest in its own kids cannot expect others to invest in their state."

He wasn't promoting investment in early childhood education as a social service or as charity. He, and other speakers at last week's Hawaii Economic Summit on Early Childhood Investment, made the hard-nosed argument for the fiscal benefits of such an investment in terms of savings to government agencies and social benefits — such as lower crime, a better prepared work force and a more productive economy.

We were told about rates of return on early childhood investment that ranged from 4 percent up to 16 percent — higher than most stock portfolios. Why then would this not be a non-negotiable element of this state's economic agenda?

The irony of the meeting, of course, was that a roomful of executives — hosted by Good Beginnings Alliance, which is guided by the proposition that "Every Keiki Deserves a Good Beginning" — were discussing the real value of investing in our children even as the state stands poised to deny them 17 school days of instruction.

As Senate Majority Leader Gary Hooser said in a recent commentary, "This is just plain unacceptable."

He's right. From the perspective of justice for the children, it is indeed unacceptable. Who is advocating for the children, nearly half of whom come from households that need assistance to pay for early childhood education?

But if we are blind to the justice argument, we should at least not be deaf to the economic argument that investing in children is a "vital economic growth strategy" as stated in the Telluride Principles for Investing in Young Children that were formulated late last year by 150 business and civic leaders in a special forum not unlike the World Economic Forum at Davos.

As businesspeople, as parents and as advocates for the children, we must revisit this plan for Furlough Fridays.

As the head of a midsized firm, I can help mitigate its impact on the one mother of two small children who works with me by making it possible for her to bring her children to work and by offering flextime. But these are small fixes for a much bigger problem that we need to address with a change in attitude and a renewal of commitment to our children. Love is as love does. And right now we are 17 days short on love — and the long view.

Dawn Morais Webster is president and chief executive of Loomis-ISC, a marketing firm in Honolulu.

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