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## Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce “Guaranteed Results: Investing in the Front End of Life” November 1, 2000

David Lawrence\*

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Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce  
"Guaranteed Results: Investing in the Front End of Life"  
November 1, 2000

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For more than a month now, I have worried about what to say, what tack to take this noontime. In these past two years of a new life and career, I have spoken to literally thousands of people. No audience means more to me than this one. For I have become convinced that unless the business and civic community can become energized and involved in this matter of "school readiness" for *all* our children, then we will make no enduring difference in thousands upon thousands of lives. That will be a tragedy for these children, and it will be a tragedy for all of us.

My mission is straight talk on a matter fundamental to our community being a good place for the future—a good place for our children, a good place for all of us.

Like you, I choose to live in Greater Miami. Like you, I love who we are and what we can become. But if we are to be honest with one another, we also must acknowledge that for all the progress we have made, we also live in a place that is undereducated, underemployed, and, in many ways, growing poorer. It is worth your knowing, for example, that just over eighteen percent of our population twenty-five years and older has at least a four-year college education; the national average is above twenty-five percent. That is not where we need to be.

School "readiness" is *not* about children learning to read by age three. It *is* about children growing—socially, emotionally, physically, and intellectually—so that they are ready and eager to learn by the time they reach first grade. It *is* about the blending of education and health and nurturing in the earliest years. We know from the science of "readiness" that these first several years of life are crucial in a way that most in our community do not yet realize.

Listen to this quotation from a book called *Ghosts from the Nursery*, by Robin Karr-Morse and Meredith Wiley:

While she is still wet from the womb, as she breathes her first breath, cries her first cry, feels her first gusts of cool air, her brain is building itself at a rate never to be repeated. She already knows the sound of her mother's voice and turns to it. She gazes at her mother's face with great concentration. Synapses in her tiny brain

are sprouting in response to each sensation. The most powerful computer in the world has been waiting for these moments of light, and smell, and touch, and sound, and taste—the carpenters of the human brain. . . . She is fully equipped . . . to learn, to connect . . . . Every system is poised to take in information—for the first and perhaps the most incisive impressions of a lifetime.

In behalf of that baby and each of the 31,000 babies who will be born in our community this year, I have come to know that an integrated, comprehensive approach—covering health and education and nurturing for *all* children between birth and age five—is our best hope for lasting progress. We must do much better than the present hodgepodge of programs—good programs invariably led by good people, but so often disconnected from other good people, other good programs.

Our mission must embrace *all* children, which is not the way the present “system” works. Instead, well intended, good-hearted people target one deeply disadvantaged neighborhood or another, and then devote extra resources, which, because those resources are disbursed in such a non-holistic way, so often add up to precious little progress for children. Meantime, the rest of the community sees how we target our resources and reasons: “[o]h, I see, it is about *those* children.” But “readiness” is not and should not be just about *those* children; rather, “readiness” should be about, and for, *everyone’s* child.

Listen to this letter that I received just recently from Monica Serra, who lives on Carlyle Avenue on Miami Beach:

I am a single mother with two children. My older son is seven years old and in the second grade. My younger son . . . will turn four on January fifth. I wanted my youngest son to start pre-kindergarten. At Biscayne Elementary I got the application to a program called Head Start. This program is for children three to five years old. I went to the interview, and I was denied. They told me I made too much money. I’m really upset. . . . My annual income is \$23,500.

Ladies and gentlemen, Mrs. Serra might not fit the federal definition of poverty, but \$23,500 and two children leaves her a great distance from middle-class existence. Here, then, is a working parent—like so many others—who wants to do right by her children, and the so-called “system” has no room for her children. They lose. So do we all.

I am neither utopian dreamer nor socialistic revolutionary. If your family, or my own, can afford to pay for basic and quality services, then we

should. But if a family cannot, then it is in the community's interest, *our* interest, to make available those basic and quality services.

Mrs. Serra's children need all the quality early care and education that your children and my own need: love and nurturing; all their shots; excellent nutrition; the fullest opportunity to be safe; stimulating pre-K experiences; child care that engages the mind, not the "warehousing" that most children receive. One startling statistic: of the 1357 licensed child-care centers in Miami-Dade County, just fifty-five are nationally accredited, meaning at those you can have assurances of a stimulating environment for your child.

You and I cannot afford to do anything less than provide high-quality early childhood care and education to *all* children who need it. We cannot afford to do anything less than provide first-rate health care for *all* children. How can we live with ourselves when literally tens of thousands of children between birth and age five in our county go to the emergency room for basic medical care because they have no health insurance and no family pediatrician? How can we afford to do anything less than commit to every child and every parent that we are prepared to devote the resources, in public and private partnership, that will give every child the chance to be truly ready for school and for life?

How tragic that up to thirty percent of the children in first grade in our community are significantly behind, and so many will never catch up. But you might say to me: "[c]hildren at this age have young and fertile minds. They will quickly catch up." How very wrong you would be. I give you a most compelling figure from an American Reading Association study of two years ago: if one hundred children come out of the first grade not really being able to read, then eighty-eight of them will really not know how to read after the fourth grade either. Surely that is a wakeup call for readiness for all children.

How do I convince you that "readiness" is our mutual mission? How do I convince you that this *must* be done?

*Do I make the case with tough facts, tough figures, a mind-blowing dose of reality?*

The twenty-nine percent of our fourth graders who did miserably on Florida's writing assessment test. Our math scores that fall way short of the national median. The forty percent of our ninth graders who do not complete high school. The 35,000 children in our community who need mental health services, which most do not get. The 2498 low birthweight babies born here last year. The 1497 babies born to twelve to seventeen-year-olds. The violent teen crimes up more than thirty five percent in the past five years. The 17,457 reported incidents of fighting last year in Miami-Dade

schools. The 498 incidents of weapons possession in those schools. The 18,647 cases of domestic violence last year in our county.

*Or do I appeal to your sense of civility and decency?*

In this community of great decency and so many giving people, surely every child is *entitled* to a decent beginning in life. To use the words of the great educator John Dewey: “[w]hat the wisest and best parents want for [their] own children, [so] must the community want for all its children.” Or, to quote the great thinker W.E.B. Du Bois: “[i]n the treatment of the child the world foreshadows its own future.”

*Or do I appeal to your sense of economic imperative and business investment?*

Readiness is, in fact, a matter of business investment as well as in the self-interest of all of us. An educated community is a safer, more prosperous, more optimistic community for everyone. We know from the research that if we were ever to spend a dollar wisely up front—that is, from prenatal to age five—we would not have to spend seven dollars at the other end on police and prosecution and prison, and remedial education of all sorts. Ladies and gentlemen, you and I will either pay *a few* dollars more up front in children’s lives, or we will pay *many more* more dollars when they get older. A more educated, contributing citizenry literally *depends* on children coming to first grade *eager* and *able* to learn. The greatest gift we could give our schools, Roger Cuevas would confirm, is more children ready for success in the first grade and, hence, in life.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have been to first grade classrooms in Miami-Dade County where teachers tell me that *more than half* of their students are severely, distinctly behind. How could a prudent community permit this? How could a wise community ignore this? If we want our children and grandchildren to be able to choose this community for their lives, their work, their prosperity, their futures, then we are going to need to care about *everyone’s* child.

There are, to be sure, companies here that see “readiness” as a business imperative—Ryder, Baptist Health Systems, Royal Caribbean, Mt. Sinai, Bank of America, First Union, the University of Miami and the Assurant Group, among others. Companies that understand that parents not worried unduly about their children are more productive. Companies that understand the lessons of the New Economy—that is, a company culture of caring about children is not only right, but also smart business. Business people frequently complain about the quality of graduates—most of these business people simply not realizing that the path to hiring the most capable, most

qualified employees begins with a child's earliest years. You in business know more than anyone of the power of investment. Remember, then, that these beginning years of life furnish the optimum window for investment.

Toward that investment there is now underway in our community a crucial undertaking in behalf of children and families. It was preceded by a generous and continuing commitment and investment from four citizens of this community—Dr. Jane and Jerry Katcher and Jan and Dan Lewis—that launched The Early Childhood Initiative Foundation. Work toward “readiness” for all children here began twenty-two months ago with months of community forums and strategic planning and the full support and leadership of Mayor Alex Penelas. Thirteen months ago, 4500 people participated in the Mayor's Children's Summit on Miami Beach, where we launched four major task forces: 1) Early Development and Education; 2) Child Health and Well Being; 3) Parent and Family Skills, Services and Information; and 4) Prevention and Intervention of Violence, Abuse and Neglect. This year we are embarked on three major projects: 1) the building of an “inventory” so we know who is served, who is not, and what the gaps in service are in Miami-Dade; 2) a survey of 2000 plus parents here on attitudes and needs, with results to be revealed next month; and 3) a major, at least three-year-long campaign for public awareness on this topic, a broadcast print and website approach. That campaign, to be launched next year (and co-branded by United Way/Success by Six and The Early Childhood Initiative Foundation), will first target parents and caregivers who will be able to call—in English, Spanish or Creole—any hour of the day or night for information that ranges from “my child has been crying for hours; what should I do?” to “how do I find really good child care that I can afford?”

The work of this early childhood initiative is closely connected with the work of the Miami-Dade School Readiness Coalition, one of fifty-seven such coalitions in our state. That coalition of twenty-five members—more than a third from the business community and the private sector—includes six Chamber representatives. One of those is Bud Park, among the coalition's best, most giving members. Another stalwart is the coalition president, Chuck Hood, who left a successful career in shopping center management to toil full-time in the vineyards of “readiness.” Know that I am heartened by the Chamber's involvement. The movement for readiness *must* be a public-private venture, with some of the most visible leaders coming from business. People both open and tough-minded. People with a long-term passion and compassion in behalf of “readiness” for *all* children.

We need your commitment and your leadership to move toward a genuinely holistic readiness plan covering the 158,000 children between birth and age five in our community. That means we must work toward these five goals, and more:

- 1) High quality, nationally accredited child care available for *all* children. High quality child care, ample research informs us, makes a big difference in whether children grow up to be successful adults.
- 2) A quality “medical home” for every child pre-natal to age five—not the emergency-room-as-basic-medical-care that thousands of children receive in our community. *Every* child should be entitled to first-rate health care.
- 3) Progress toward availability of a quality pre-K experience—though not mandatory—for every four-year-old. This would incorporate public and private approaches, including Head Start and high quality child care options for parents.
- 4) “Home visiting” availability—using trained professionals or paraprofessionals—for all children from prenatal through the first two or three years of life. Important research going back two decades shows this approach leads to more successful children, more successful adults, and greater spacing between babies—three powerful and proven outcomes. We could make that happen here.
- 5) Parent skill building that recognizes the necessity of parents and families being fully involved in “readiness.” A child’s first teacher—the parent—needs to be the child’s best teacher.

Ladies and gentlemen, could we not be wise enough to come together to “own” a portrait of what we would want for every child? Is this not a matter of wise investment in their future and our own? Is it not basic American fairness that every child have a real chance to succeed?

What I seek from you today is your eagerness to build a “movement” that embraces *all* children. I want you to educate yourselves on the critical nature of these earliest years for children. I want you to think about how your company—through quality child care, through your benefits programs and in other ways—can do even more to make a difference in the lives of your employees and their offspring. I want you to see how you might get involved in these task forces—led by Carole Abbott, Wil Blechman, Ophelia Brown-Lawson, Marisel Elias-Miranda, Deise Granado-Villar, Sara Herald, Obdulio Piedra, and Peter Roulhac.

I believe that a community with the strength and compassion to overcome the terror of Hurricane Andrew *could* build a community where *no one's* child is left behind. Indeed, you and I should *insist* on that.

Should we fail to do so, I remind you of the words of the great psychiatrist Karl Menninger: "[w]hat we do to children," said Dr. Menninger, "they will do to society."

Ladies and gentlemen, the choice for our children is ours. When we do right by *our* children, *all* of our children, we will do right by ourselves.

Thank you.