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Child Poverty in Wyoming Increases

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"If you want to know your past, look into your present conditions. If you want to know your future, look into your present actions." --Ancient Proverb

The percentage of Wyoming children under age eighteen living in poverty increased from 11 percent in 2005 to 14 percent in 2010. This is a disappointing way to close off a decade in Wyoming history that has been marked by great prosperity.

Wyoming's prosperity is writ large with good intentions across the state. You see it in the capital construction at UW, and in the forward thinking Hathaway scholarship that aims to set more youth on a path toward higher education. You see it in the new school buildings and recreation facilities that have sprung up across the state. You see it in new SUVs and pick-ups cruising the streets of our more prosperous communities. You see it in the low unemployment rate and new businesses opening their doors.

Given this era of great prosperity and the promise for a brighter future that it portended, it's discouraging to report that of Wyoming children under age five, 19 percent lived in poverty in 2010, a twenty-seven percent increase since 2005.

It's clear from the research that living in poverty or in a low-income household can have a deleterious effect on all facets of a child's development, including school success. In 2010, 39 percent, or four in ten Wyoming children lived in households below 200 percent poverty, up fifteen percent from 34 percent in 2005.

PAWS data (2010) shows that 59 percent of 3rd graders eligible for free and reduced lunch scored below-proficient in reading compared to 39 percent among those not eligible, those who come from a higher income class. This pronounced achievement gap is measurable in every exam subject, across every grade level.

Nobel Prize winning economist James J. Heckman points out that investing in the early years of disadvantaged children's lives is a policy that promotes both equity and economic efficiency. According to Heckman, investing in quality early care and education is, "the foundation of school readiness", and is not only a social justice imperative but also an economic imperative with far-reaching implications for society. Heckman sites the HighScope Perry Preschool study as a model for success.

The long-term Perry study measured the effects of high-quality early care and education on low-income three and four year olds, documenting a return to society of more than \$16 for every tax dollar invested in the early care and education program.

The researchers who carried out the Perry study recommend several key elements for a successful quality early-childhood education program. Those elements include an evidence based program model utilizing highly qualified staff while maintaining group sizes of 1:10 children. In addition, the teachers should interact with families on a regular basis via home visits. Finally, in order to validate services are supporting children and families they must engage in regular evaluation of the program and children's progress.

The recession that began in 2008 hit our Nation hard and the economy remains stagnate. Slow recovery is seemingly fueled by hope and sometimes by hope alone. How unfortunate that policy discussions taking place here in Wyoming sometimes veer into the ideological wilderness under the influence of bickering Washington politicians more concerned with getting elected than solving our Nation's problems.

Wyoming's recent rejection of Federal money for programs aimed at improving the lives of disadvantaged children may in some obtuse way teach Washington a lesson in frugality. However, the unintended consequence will very likely be the slowing of progress towards improving Wyoming children's lives. Our elected leaders may want to more carefully examine the long-term impact on quality of life in Wyoming when weighing policy choices in today's politically charged climate.

Wyoming needs a long-term strategic plan for helping ensure children stay out of poverty and on a path towards good health, quality education, and prosperity, throughout the good times and the bad. As the Governor suggested when meeting with the Joint Appropriations committee, delaying work on needed infrastructure projects may make them more expensive in the future. Continuing with investments aimed at improving the lives of children will result in less dollar expenditures, lower social costs, and a higher quality of life for all of Wyoming.