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Good investment

Nonprofit, businesses aid education

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People like those who run Goldman Sachs and J.B. Pritzker don't make investments without due diligence. These banking and investment experts have seen the mounting evidence of the academic, social and economic benefits of early-childhood education and believe instruction for at-risk children will bring a solid return.

The United Way of Salt Lake wants to convince Utah legislators their faith is warranted and has struck a \$7 million deal with the two companies to expand access to public preschool for up to 3,700 low-income children. The money is a loan from the private investors, who expect to be repaid over 12 years at 5 percent interest.

The first installment of \$1 million will be used to open 450 more slots in a popular preschool program at Title I schools in Granite and Park City school districts. The United Way has committed to repay that initial loan, called a "social investment." The agency's plan is to show how well preschool works to bring at-risk kids up to the level of school readiness of their more advantaged peers.

In order to access the remaining \$6 million of the loan, United Way must persuade other private-sector investors and Utah legislators to provide funding to repay the continuing loans.

Research and the success of the Granite and Park City districts' programs show the investment is sound. Early-childhood education boosts children's achievement in school and success in jobs and higher education. In the long run, having more children graduate from high school and college with marketable skills saves tax dollars.

Evaluations of 3- and 4-year-olds who entered the program in 2006 showed 33 percent were so far behind on fundamentals — colors, shapes, letters and numbers — that they probably would have needed special education, and some still may have fallen far behind.

But after participating in preschool, 95 percent of those students did not need special-education services. That saves an estimated \$2,607 per-pupil per year, according to a study that tracked students through 2010, sponsored by the United Way, Voices for Utah Children and the district.

J.B. Pritzker, president of the Chicago-based J.B. and M.K. Pritzker Family Foundation, said in a statement, "Investing early and intelligently ... in early learning reduces social and economic inequality and builds a better workforce and a stronger nation."

Sen. Aaron Osmond, R-South Jordan, and Rep. Greg Hughes, R-Draper, this year sponsored a bill to set up similar public-private investments, but it sadly failed, opposed by arch-conservatives.

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