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## **Quality early care and education provides the foundation for all future learning**

*A guest editorial from DCF Secretary Emilie Amundson*

As a former teacher, the back-to-school season always brings back the best memories. From setting up my classroom while enjoying the smell of all the fresh school supplies to marveling at the sound of the buzzing halls as kids reconnect, there is just something so special about back to school season.

As schools across Wisconsin welcome back learners of all ages, I want to give a special shout out to our youngest learners who are experiencing so many firsts this September. Firsts like being away from their parents or caregivers, navigating a bus full of kids, working with peers, and managing their physical and emotional needs. Some may struggle with these firsts, but research shows that kindergartners who have experienced early care and education experiences typically have a leg up on their classmates thanks to an early focus on developing their social, emotional, and cognitive skills.

In fact, the interactions children have in their first five years have a big impact. That is because the brain is growing at lightning speed - producing more than a million new neural connections each second. These critical connections help build a strong foundation for the ever-changing brain architecture. Like building a house, the brain needs a solid, strong foundation to build upon. While our genes give us a blueprint, experiences and interactions determine whether the structure is built for a lifetime of learning and future success.

It is clear that parents are the lead contractor in the building of the brain, but other caregivers, such as child care providers, relatives and other adults that children interact with regularly, play an equally large role in helping a child reach their full potential. Because almost 75% of children under the age of 6 have all available parents in the workforce, high-quality early childhood learning programs are playing an even more critical role in this crucial development.

When you send your child off to kindergarten, you probably are not thinking about them graduating high school, attending college, or getting their first job. Yet, these are some of the many long-term benefits that happen at a greater rate when children experience quality early care and education opportunities prior to grade school.

The evidence is clear – there's a proven return on investment for everyone when we all invest in quality early care and education. That is why the upcoming special session called by Governor Evers is so critical to not only building strong communities but supporting Wisconsin's greatest resource: our children.

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