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Investing in Kentucky's children

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As the current First Lady and former First Ladies of Kentucky, we have joined forces because we all value children and understand the importance of investing in their lives. During this holiday season, one of the best gifts we can give our children is a strong foundation that will prepare them to be the leaders of tomorrow. We know how crucial it is that each of our children and every child in Kentucky receive the education they need to become successful adults.

That's why we, along with all of Kentucky's former First Ladies, are serving as honorary co-chairpersons of a statewide campaign, Seniors4Kids, because as grandparents, parents, sisters and aunts we care about Kentucky's future. We want policy makers to understand the importance of investing in Kentucky's children and make high-quality pre-kindergarten available to every 3- and 4-year-old. We want to guarantee that Kentucky realizes that investing in its children and making high-quality pre-kindergarten available to every 3- and 4-year-old is pro-economy and pro-productivity. Recent research indicates that children who attend pre-K strengthen their social and cognitive skills and go on to become successful adults.

According to the latest annual report from the National Institute for Early Education, spending per child enrolled in pre-K in Kentucky is still below the national average.

In addition to spending per child, the percentage of 3- and 4-year-old children enrolled in pre-K in Kentucky is also below the national average. Only about 41 percent of 3- and 4-year-olds attend pre-K programs in the state. Among all the states, Kentucky ranks as 31st for number of children enrolled.

We can change the world by ensuring that we adequately prepare and educate our 3- and 4-year-olds.

Kentuckians of both political parties are focused on increasing pre-K quality and

accessibility. The Kentucky Preschool Program was created as one part of the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 to provide a high-quality pre-K program to the state's neediest children. Financial difficulties prevented the Kentucky Preschool Program from growing for over a decade, but since 2006 there has been an increase of \$23.5 million in funding.

On Oct. 29, 2007, as part of the initiative of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, the committee's Strong Start Kentucky program convened nearly 50 state leaders to develop recommendations to improve quality and access around the state. The recommendations stressed making voluntary, quality pre-K available for every 3- and 4-year-old in Kentucky.

Adults 50 and older will be instrumental in supporting efforts to increase quality and access to pre-K programs in Kentucky. Baby boomers are starting to reach the age typically associated with retirement. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of adults ages 50 and older in Kentucky is going to increase substantially while the number of children ages 3 and 4 will change very little. These older adults will make great advocates for our children.

Developing high-quality pre-kindergarten is the most cost-effective way to decrease the number of unskilled adults in Kentucky's work force. A good early childhood education helps prepare a child for achievement by improving school readiness in vocabulary, reading scores and math skills.

One of our volunteers explained it best when she described her recent visit to a pre-kindergarten classroom in Kentucky. She saw an eager boy who was learning and thriving, a youngster who, his teacher adamantly explained, had special learning needs and wasn't speaking until he started pre-K. And now, after just a short amount of time, he was almost caught up with his age group. What a wonderful example of a pre-K success.

It is because of successes like this that we're pleased to join Seniors4Kids in working to improve education in Kentucky, education that will benefit people of all generations.

During this holiday season, we all have time to reflect on what is important to us. As those who have had the privilege of serving Kentucky as First Ladies, we believe the most critical gift we can give our state's children is a sound beginning. We encourage Kentuckians everywhere to join us and make a New Year's resolution to support pre-K for all of Kentucky's children.

The writers have all been Kentucky's First Lady.