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Childhood services 'investment' in jobs

A family of two adults, one infant, and one preschooler needs \$43,956 to afford housing, child care, food, transportation, health care and taxes in Hinds County, according to a new report by the Mississippi Economic Policy Center, a nonpartisan economic policy think tank.

This is almost double the federal poverty measure (\$22,050) for the same size family. Unlike the federal poverty measure, which was developed in the 1960s and accounts only for the cost of food, the self-sufficiency standard varies by county and the size and composition of families, and includes actual costs associated with living and working, such as child care and housing.

The federal poverty measure is important because it is used to calculate eligibility for a number of poverty and work support programs. Anyone who has ever paid a bill knows the federal poverty measure grossly underestimates what families need to make ends meet.

Mississippi is dominated by low-wage work that does not pay enough to move families to self-sufficiency. The state's economy suffers when low-wage work prevails. Businesses will not move to Mississippi if we can't offer an educated, skilled, healthy work force.

A strong state economy requires affordable, quality child care for our state's working families. Mothers of young children are 50 percent more likely to stay employed if they receive help paying for child care and welfare recipients with young children are 80 percent more likely to stay employed if they receive child care assistance. According to the MEPC report, child care assistance can substantially reduce child care costs, from \$592 a month for a family of three in Hinds County, to \$198 a month. However, the child care assistance program in Mississippi for low-income working parents only reimburses child care providers at the 49th percentile of market rates for the care of toddlers. Mississippi should increase the reimbursement level to the federal recommendation of the 75th percentile of current market rates to ensure that parents have sufficient access to quality child care.

The state's regressive income tax makes it difficult for working families to make ends meet. After federal deductions are taken into account, the lowest 20 percent of working Mississippians are taxed at nearly twice the rate of the highest earners. Instead, public policy should "make work pay." Tax credits should be expanded to include all working families below the self-sufficiency standard.

A work force-ready population literally begins at birth. However, Mississippi is one of only 12 states without a state-funded pre-k program. Quality pre-k programs have significant, positive outcomes for children and their families, as well as state, regional and national economies. According to Cathy Grace, director of the Early Childhood Institute at Mississippi State University, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Louisiana all invest between \$30 million and \$50 million into early childhood education, while Mississippi allocates only \$3 million, or the minimum required by law. What message are we sending businesses when the state refuses to invest in early childhood education, a proven strategy for work force development?

The recently released "Self Sufficiency Standard for Mississippi" report should be a wake-up call for all Mississippians. If we envision a state with high-wage jobs and decreased reliance on public assistance, we will invest early and often in education, training, and work supports that enable families and communities to thrive.