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## Erasing a decade's progress

In the fields of early childhood learning and aging, 2009 will likely be remembered as the year Ohio lost ground.

Proposed state budget cuts will erase a decade of solid - really, extraordinary - advancement in both fields. Professionals who spent their lives advocating for those changes are feeling dumbstruck, disappointed, betrayed.

For years, Ohio's education funding and policy virtually kissed off the years from birth to age 5 in terms of cognitive development. Young children, whose brains and sensory systems were primed for learning, spent their time in child care, where the emphasis was typically on care rather than enrichment and education. These perfectly ready learners were placed in a holding pattern until the system was ready for them.

Meanwhile, the kind of care they received was dicey at best. There were no widely agreed upon standards for childcare and no easy way for parents to know how to evaluate early-childhood programs.

And for children who started life off with extra strikes against them - developmental delays, young single parents, lack of support systems - there was no state mechanism to reach out to them with early intervention.

But in recent years, Ohio "got it." It put in place sensible, foundational approaches to remedy those deficiencies. The state reached out to childcare centers with a voluntary quality rating system, creating a public understanding of what effective early childhood programs looked like and building demand for them.

It invested in blue-chip efforts like Every Child Succeeds and other home-visitation programs for first-time parents, partnering them with nurses, social workers and child development specialists. It expanded state support for preschool programs for disadvantaged children. It developed early childhood learning standards that flowed into K-12 standards, finally creating a more integrated and holistic educational system.

It wasn't perfect, but boy was it a start. And now those advancements may be erased by more than \$310 million budget cuts. It's almost too discouraging to contemplate.

Meanwhile, the state spent the same period helping Ohioans not only begin life well but age well.

Pushing funding for seniors from institutional care to in-home care - with programs like Passport - was nothing short of revolutionary. It not only saved the state hundreds of millions of dollars, but respected the wishes of the majority of Ohioans who say they'd rather age in their own homes.

Each adult who had the option to stay in his or her own home was a win. Taken together, they created significant cost savings and built critical mass for a more flexible and efficient network of senior services and options.

Had the momentum continued, it would have significantly reduced the number of elderly and disabled

in nursing homes - including 54,700 Medicaid recipients - and tamed the state's \$2.5 billion annual Medicaid bill for their care. But proposed cuts - an estimated 18 percent reduction in 2010 and 15 percent in 2011 - will add 10,000 to 12,000 people to the Passport waiting list, forcing many into more expensive institutional care than they need.

These are serious setbacks for the state, both financially and philosophically. They move Ohio from progressive thinking on early childhood and elderly services back to limited options and lower-quality alternatives. It comes as bitter regression for those who spent decades working for an enlightened Ohio.

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