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Economist's Plan to Improve Schools Begins Before Kindergarten

By James Warren

J. B. Pritzker, a prominent Chicago businessman, says he wakes up each day mulling the best way to get a return on his investments. The most valuable resource he can find is “smart people with character.”

It explains why, last week, Mr. Pritzker, a liberal Democrat, introduced a person he described as a University of Chicago supply-side economist at a gathering that might have benefited mayoral candidates concerned about Chicago's public schools performance.

At the gathering, James J. Heckman, who has won the Nobel in economic science, offered a provocative idea for reducing spiraling budget deficits and strengthening the economy: investing in early childhood development.

Mr. Heckman marshals ample data to suggest that better teaching, higher standards, smaller classrooms and more Internet access “have less impact than we think,” as he put it at the Spertus Institute. To focus as intently as we do on the kindergarten to high school years misses how “the accident of birth is the greatest source of inequality,” he said.

He urges more effectively educating children before they step into a classroom where, as Chicago teachers tell me, they often are clueless about letters, numbers and colors — and lack the attentiveness and persistence to ever catch up. Matters are as bleak with many students entering the City Colleges system.

Mr. Heckman is not really a supply-sider, but he is big on return on investment, just like Mr. Pritzker, who sponsored the Spertus event with the McCormick Foundation and is also a contributor to my wife's nonprofit group.

He contends that high-quality programs focused on birth to age 5 produce a higher per-dollar return than K-12 schooling and later job training. They reduce deficits by reducing the need for special education and remediation, and by cutting juvenile delinquency, teenage pregnancy and dropout rates.

With charts and references to long-term studies, Mr. Heckman underscored why families matter and attributed the widening gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged to deficits in skills

and abilities that begin with inadequate early childhood development.

One slide juxtaposed achievement test scores with a mother's education. If you come from a single-parent home with a mother who dropped out of school, your scores lag far behind throughout your academic life.

Test scores may measure smarts, not the character that turns knowledge into know-how. “Socio-emotional skills” or “character,” which we don't often measure, are critical, and include motivation, the ability to work with others, attention, self-regulation, self-esteem and the ability to defer gratification.

There are few more influential thinkers than Mr. Heckman on the impact of social programs and methods used to assess them.

“He's one of the great labor economists of all time, a pioneer of empirical analysis of labor markets, human capital and education,” said Austan Goolsbee, chairman of President Obama's Council of Economic Advisers and a University of Chicago colleague.

In the mayoral race, only the freshly certified (to run) Rahm Emanuel and Gery Chico offer extensive plans for education reform. Mr. Emanuel's ideas strike some nonpartisan folks as more innovative, but Mr. Chico puts early learning front and center.

To their credit, both encourage parental participation, though that's a complex topic. It's especially knotty for poor parents who don't have computers, easy transportation or time to be involved in their child's school.

Finally, each seems more tactical than strategic, with neither arguably offering a compelling answer to a simple question: What exactly is the purpose of a Chicago public school education?

Many politicians jabber about “preparing our children for a global high-tech economy.” That's a projection of the present onto a future we stumble to imagine, let alone predict.

But if Mr. Heckman is correct, the purpose of education is what it has always been: to develop a well-rounded, knowledgeable and adaptable person; to create upward mobility through smarts and character.

Imagine more young adults going off into the world to make it better — and fewer coming home to sleep on the couch. If a candidate forced a real debate on such a vision, and a plan to pay for it, parents might pony up even in tough times.

James Warren writes a column for the Chicago News Cooperative, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization providing local coverage of Chicago and the surrounding area for The New York Times.