

Early education argument: Pay now or later

John Vahlenkamp, Longmont Times-Call

LONGMONT — Keynote speaker Bill Millett came to present the case for early childhood education in a global economy.

But before Millett stood to speak, school board President John Creighton told those gathered for Thursday's Education Foundation of the St. Vrain Valley luncheon that advances the local district already has made — such as preschool offerings and all-day kindergarten — are at risk.

“If we don't get these (budget problems) fixed at the state level, all of these things are at risk. ... It is going to require us to raise our taxes,” he said.

Millett, who championed the economic value of early childhood education in his address, privately thanked Creighton afterward for his “candid” remarks.

“You win by the cheap, you die by the cheap,” Millett had told the 150 educational and community leaders who attended the event at LifeBridge Christian Church.

Much of Millett's message was not new: The American educational system is lagging. Other nations, specifically India and China, are leapfrogging the United States in educational achievement. Our students must be prepared to compete with the world.

However, Millett set forth an economic argument for early childhood education, avoiding, as he put it, the “warm and fuzzy images” and instead providing a grim picture of an America with an “abundance of labor and a paucity of talent.”

“Early childhood development means more tax generators and fewer tax consumers,” Millett told the audience, citing studies that show that education leads to productive, taxpaying citizens, and that a lack of education is more likely to lead to citizens who drain society, such as criminals.

Millett's recommendations:

Invest in early childhood education, which provides the best return on investment.

Compare our schools not to others in the state, but to the best in the world.

Recruit and train the best students to become teachers. “I don't want a football coach teaching math; and I don't want a math teacher coaching football, either.”

Quit accepting lame excuses from politicians. “Unless we get riled up, I don't think (change) is going to happen.”

Millett is president of Scope View Strategic Advantage, a consulting firm based in North Carolina. He came at the invitation of the Community Foundation Serving Boulder County, which sponsored Thursday's luncheon along with the Education Foundation.

The event was the kickoff of the Community Foundation's “Ready. Set. Learn.” campaign, designed to increase awareness of the importance of early childhood education.