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LATE CAREER, EARLY CHILDHOOD

The brain of a preschool child is an amazing thing — growing and processing and taking in the world at an astonishing rate. We adults are more fixed and set in our ways. Can the two come together — can the adult brain figure out what to do with those little brains out there?

David Lawrence is an adult, to be sure, a career newspaperman who retired as publisher of the Miami Herald in 1999. He now uses his adult brain on behalf of the smaller versions, promoting the need for high-quality, affordable early-childhood education so that children arrive at elementary school ready to "rock and roll," as he likes to say.

Lawrence was the keynote speaker at a legislative summit on early childhood education in the House chambers on Wednesday. He told us of successful efforts in Florida, never thought of a tax-loving state, to provide funding for preschool programs for all 4-year-olds; to invest in additional help for those with special challenges; to improve early-learning teaching skills; and to provide parents with rankings of how child care centers and early-learning programs measure up.

Lawrence makes a strong argument that this is something parents want for their children — not something a "nanny state" has to force down their throats. And he argues that these programs cannot be focused on "at-risk" segments, but must be "about all children."

We are pleased to hear legislative leaders thinking hard about this at a time of economic crisis. It is their job to think of the state's future even as they deal with the present. House Speaker Margaret Anderson Kelliher and Senate Majority Leader Larry Pogemiller, both DFL-Minneapolis, expressed strong support. "If we had one dollar in new money to invest in education, the best investment is pre-K education," Pogemiller said.

Thanks to people like David Lawrence, an early-childhood revolution is at hand. Its greatest benefit may be in helping working parents think of the hours they are separated from the kids as learning time and not just "day care" time. They will seek out the best programs, whether private or public, and at some point, Minnesota may follow Florida's lead and make this a funding priority.

We need to put our old brains to work pondering the miracle of those smaller, sponge-like organs encased in very small heads.