

How to fight crime: Invest in our kids

By Margaret E. Ryan, published in the Ithaca Journal, Binghamton Press and Elmira Star-Gazette

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Finally, some good news for our state's crime fighters: New York has been chosen as a Race to the Top state and will receive additional federal funds for education reform and innovation.

While we in law enforcement spend every day tracking down, arresting and prosecuting dangerous criminals, we also know that to win the fight against crime, we must prevent kids from becoming criminals in the first place. New federal education support from Race to the Top could help us do just that.

We know that school success is central to keeping kids out of trouble. More than 70 percent of the people in New York's prisons have not graduated from high school and do not have the education and skills they need to get and hold a decent job. With no job and little education, too many of our young people turn to crime.

New York's Race to the Top plan wisely includes early education and pre-kindergarten programs as a key to improving academic performance and boosting high school graduation rates. As numerous studies point out, children who attend high-quality early learning programs are much more likely to succeed in school and less likely to turn to crime than similar children who do not have access to these programs.

But there is one important catch to consider as we work to reform New York's system of education. The only way we are going to get significant returns on our early learning investments - including a reduction in serious crime - is to make sure the programs are of the highest quality. The pre-K programs that produce the best results emphasize the role of parents as their child's most important teachers and provide important resources to families to help them meet the needs of their children.

High-quality early learning programs have well-compensated and well-trained teachers, and provide a safe and age-appropriate environment that fosters learning and allows children to practice social skills such as sharing, taking turns and following directions.

Presently, New York state does not have uniform standards or a system to evaluate and improve early education programs. We are lagging behind. Nearly half the states across the nation have implemented a Quality Rating Improvement System that sets universal standards for early learning settings and creates a structure for accountability.

This is why law enforcement leaders across the state are calling on the Legislature and governor to implement a Quality Rating Improvement System like QUALITYstarsNY.

Currently, New York is field-testing QUALITYstarsNY at 240 different early-education sites in 13 counties across the state. QUALITYstarsNY would set clear quality standards

for early education programs and create a roadmap for improvement. Besides providing the resources and technical assistance needed to improve programs, it would also give parents reliable information on how to choose the best program for their child.

If we are to succeed in our race to the top, we need to make certain that every New York state child has a chance to arrive at kindergarten healthy and eager to learn. The sad reality is that kids who are behind when they start school rarely, if ever, catch up. Providing high quality pre-K programs is not only good for our children, it is good for all of us; it will help make our communities safer in the long run.