Talking the Heckman Equation

Invest
+ Develop
+ Sustain
= Gain

The Heckman Equation proves the value of investing in human potential.

The Message:

Nobel Memorial Prize Laureate Professor James Heckman has uncovered a new way of looking at the full picture of the development of human potential. He believes that there is too much focus on the development of cognitive skills where knowledge can be tested, rather than on the development of social skills — such as attentiveness, persistence and working with others. When social skills are combined at an early age with cognitive skills, they help create more capable and productive citizens.

Every child needs effective early childhood development to be successful, but disadvantaged children are least likely to get it. Professor Heckman has proven that investing in the early childhood development of disadvantaged children will produce great returns to individuals and society in better education, health, economic and social outcomes — not only saving taxpayers money but increasing our nation's economic productivity. Everyone gains when we invest, develop and sustain the early development of America's greatest natural resource — its people.

This message works because:

• It changes the frame of investing in the disadvantaged from a discussion about rights and equities to an understanding about how to create social and economic enhancements that will benefit everyone.

• It introduces a new concept that is just beginning to take hold in the American consciousness — our focus on strictly measuring cognitive achievement is undermining the development of American character, the ability to combine collaboration, creativity and persistence with intelligence.

• It frames the discussion as an investment that pays dividends and helps policymakers understand why and how to make an investment — and it helps the public see the value they receive from the investment even if their own children will not receive state or federal support.

• Most importantly, the message is positive: we have an answer to the root causes of many problems, but it is framed as a root solution to developing better social and economic outcomes. Policymakers and voters are looking for answers. Framing your advocacy as a solution is much more effective than framing it as a litany of problems, complaints and demands.

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When you communicate the Heckman Equation, be sure to keep these important precepts in mind:

Always advocate for the package of cognitive and social skills.

The cognitive and social skills package is an intuitive concept for the great majority of people. Yet, policymakers feel a need to justify their investments in early childhood development through measures of cognitive aptitude. For example, the common question, "Will the child know how to read by age four?" suggests that the important measurement is how much that child knows. Professor Heckman's framing puts an emphasis on how well equipped he or she will be to build upon their learning to-date through subsequent education and social experiences. Motivation begets skills; skills beget motivation. Cognitive and social skills become the two-stroke engine of success.

Always advocate parental responsibility and social responsibility.

The biggest barrier to public investment in early childhood: "It is the parent's responsibility to provide for the early development of their children, not the government's." The way to get around this barrier is to stress that while it is every parent's responsibility to provide essential early childhood development, it is also true that many disadvantaged parents lack the education, income and social skills to provide it on their own. If, as Professor Heckman has proven, early childhood education is critical for every child, society has a responsibility to help disadvantaged children and their families gain access to the early development resources they need. The Heckman Equation helps us break the cycle of poverty by combining personal and social responsibility.

Always combine benefits for the disadvantaged with benefits for the advantaged.

When you talk about the beneficial outcomes of investing in disadvantaged children, don't stop at the benefits bestowed upon the child, but go a step further to communicate how benefiting that child will benefit society at large by producing greater outcomes in the investments we are already making or contemplating making in education, health and economic development.

Always advocate funding early childhood development starting at birth and continuing through five years.

Professor Heckman's work shows that we get greater value from investing in childhood development at the earliest age — preferably at birth.

Talk local not national.

While current research shows that the public will embrace state and federal investment in early childhood education programs, they very much want local control in much the same way they demand it for public education. You should focus your advocacy on standards, caring and outcomes — not necessarily on preconceived notions of whom is best to provide them.

Make sure the programs you advocate pass the test.

Professor Heckman does not and will not endorse any specific early childhood development programs. However, we know that policymakers, the public and Professor Heckman will support locally run and controlled programs that have the following components:

1. Focus on helping disadvantaged children from ages zero to five;
2. Have professional staff that concentrate on developing the package of cognitive and social skills in young children;
3. Offer support and education for parents to help them support their child's development;
4. Collect and analyze data on child development during the program and frequently check in with student progress after the program.

www.heckmanequation.org

Heckman
The economics of human potential.