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## Coalition for Early Education to be formed

Atlanta Business Chronicle - by [Maria Saporta](#) Contributing Writer

After nearly two years of study, top local business and civic leaders are convinced that Georgia needs a cohesive organization to advocate for early childhood education.

The Early Education Commission, co-chaired by Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta President Dennis Lockhart and Spelman College President Beverly Daniel Tatum, recently delivered its final report with one overarching recommendation — create a Georgia Coalition for Early Education.

Philanthropist Stephanie Blank, who served on the commission, has agreed to be the founding chair of the Georgia Coalition for Early Education.

“It’s the culmination of everything I’ve been working on for the past 15 years,” Blank said. “To see it all come together is very exciting.”

Blank, who will be transitioning out of her role as chair of the Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta Foundation, has been a longtime champion for children and education in a variety of different roles.

But Blank said she recognizes that the “best investment of dollars is in early education” because the more children that go to school prepared to learn the less they will cost government as adults. They will have a far greater chance to develop into productive members of society rather than ending up on welfare, in prison or other institutions.

“Too often we try to address the problem when it’s already a problem,” Blank said. “If we are going to be wise in the way we spend money, we should try to prevent or eliminate the problem.”

The vision for the Georgia Coalition for Early Education is: “By 2020, Georgia will be a national leader ensuring that all children enter kindergarten ready to learn and on a path to read to learn by third grade.”

The Early Education Commission said that to reach that goal there will need to be a four-pronged concerted effort to:

- improve the quality of child care, be it at centers or in homes;
- increase parental involvement by providing parents with tools and resources to help their children learn;
- improve public awareness by launching a statewide campaign emphasizing the importance of learning from birth to age 5; and
- become an advocate for quality, accessibility and affordability of early childhood care and education.

The coalition will partner with existing organizations to help in each of those initiatives.

Lockhart said that the commission benchmarked where Georgia stood compared to other states, showing mixed results.

Lockhart added that Georgia can’t stand still because “many jurisdictions across the country are moving aggressively on this.”

Tatum agreed. “That means we are falling behind,” she said, adding that not investing in early education will be more expensive in the long run. “The research tells you that early intervention is cost-effective.”

The idea of a coalition was presented as a way to have sustained attention on early education issues.

“It’s important to have a leadership entity outside of government that could commit to this cause through the ups and downs of state government and the political process,” Lockhart said.

Blank said her next step will be to name the coalition’s board, which she said would be a geographic representation from across the state and include people committed to early learning, philanthropists and business leaders. The coalition also will initiate a national search for a director to lead the effort.

The coalition also plans to hold an early education summit in the fall to “kick off the initiative,” Blank said.

And given that Georgia will be electing its next governor later this year, Blank said, “We will want to put this on the agenda for the gubernatorial election. We hope there will be a strong partnership with the state — whoever gets into office.”

Blank said the good news is that foundations and philanthropists understand the need to invest in education.



Joann Vitelli

Stephanie Blank: She wants to put early education on the agenda for Georgia’s upcoming gubernatorial election.

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“Currently about 2 percent of the funding from philanthropy going to education is going to early learning,” said Blank, who then recited a recent survey of philanthropists. “But 29 percent of that group said that more funding should go to early education. Part of our strategy will be to work with existing organizations and make it easy to invest in early education.”

Those potential partners include Voices for Georgia’s Children, Smart Start/**United Way**, Georgia Association on Young Children, and **Quality Care for Children**, among others. The United Way for **Metropolitan Atlanta Inc.** will house the coalition and offer back-office support, according to its president, Milton Little.

Asked whether they would be part of the coalition, both Lockhart and Tatum said they will be happy to be involved, even if it’s just in an advisory role.

“We are handing this off to Stephanie,” Lockhart said. “It’s up to her to decide who else she wants to be on the board.”

“It’s a wonderful thing that Stephanie is willing to take this up,” Tatum said. “And Dennis and I will be supportive.”

*Reach Saporta at [maria@saporta.biz](mailto:maria@saporta.biz)*

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