Education from the Very Beginning! - Children Need Good Daycare Centers

Why Daimler is doing the right thing by promoting early childhood education for clever minds.

You would think a major automotive company would have more important things to do than set up daycare centers, especially during an economic crisis. So why is Daimler promoting the development of young children by making a major investment in the upbringing, education, and care of employee children under three years of age at all its German locations? Wouldn't it make more sense to invest in the company's core business — for example in research and development, or the expansion of efficiency-boosting state-of-the-art manufacturing technologies?

Ilse Wehrmann, education consultant for the establishment of daycare centers located at or near Daimler facilities

My view

Daimler is focusing on sustainability by implementing a forward-looking approach that goes beyond immediate considerations or those related to the current crisis. The company's localized daycare services for children of employees are being closely monitored by both government and businesses. This is due to the indisputable fact that children are our future and educational processes must therefore be designed in a professional manner from the very beginning. Such processes should also be contained within a high-quality educational infrastructure. Failure to do all of this amounts to wasting too much of our society's most important, and in fact only, future potential.

Who are the engineers of tomorrow? Who will build the cars of the future — and who will be the customers who buy them?

Daimler's approach is also correct for the short and medium terms when you consider the question of how highly qualified engineers can be reintegrated into the workforce after taking parental leave, which should be as short as possible. After all, this issue is crucial for retaining the expertise of such individuals for the development teams, and they themselves can lose out on their career development and fall behind in their professional skills after taking a break for two or even three years. But we also need to enable young professionals such as marketing managers to fulfill their dream of having a family, without having to sacrifice their career goals.

In Germany we have clung to an outdated view of families and parenting for too long. As a result, we now face a huge problem with regard to education and the reconciliation of family and career. Many young people are forced to choose between the two — and college graduates in particular often decide against having children. In fact, the birth rate in
Germany has remained stagnant at 1.4 children per woman on average since the mid-1970s.

Ninety percent of the men surveyed in a study conducted by the German Youth Institute (DJI) said they would welcome workplace measures that allow them to spend more time with their families as “active fathers.”

However, only three percent of the working fathers reported receiving sufficient daycare support from their employers.

These findings are confirmed in a study conducted by occupational science experts at the Ruhr University in Bochum and the Association of German Engineers, which concluded that most professionals do not consider a classic career — one marked by rapid advancement or responsibility for numerous employees — to be a successful career. Instead, they believe a successful career is one that also allows them to reconcile the needs of work and family. The work-life balance was particularly important to young respondents here, the majority of whom were men.

According to the Capital Elite Panel survey of 2007, 84 percent of Germany’s top managers are convinced that family-friendliness is important for Germany’s success as a business location. A 2008 study by the Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach found that 71 percent of German companies believe they share responsibility for making it easier for employees to combine a career and family.

Daimler is therefore on the right track with its decision to set up daycare centers at all of its German locations, as it’s showing itself to be an employer whose innovative human resources policy makes it well prepared for the future. The reconciliation of family and career will be a decisive human resources factor in recruiting and retaining qualified and motivated employees in a future environment that will be marked by a shortage of skilled professionals.

**Why companies must address the education issue**

Given the extremely slow pace of progress in the expansion of public daycare infrastructure in Germany, more and more companies are now taking matters into their own hands. And they’re well advised to take this step: According to a study of early childhood education systems carried out by the Bertelsmann Foundation in 2009, the old West German states would have to double their current pace of infrastructure expansion in order to provide daycare spots for 35 percent of all children under age three by 2013, as called for by the Kinderförderungsgesetz (law for the support of children).

Moreover, even if every third child under three in Germany were to be given daycare by 2013, we’d still be a long way from having a system that covers our true needs. The current debate regarding daycare subsidies is actually attempting to reverse the advances made, as it focuses on public funding for individual services rather than the establishment of a solid education infrastructure. The results of comparative education performance studies like PISA, IGLU, and others illustrate why this is a dangerous development, one that will likely lead to further social distortions. It would be a fatal decision to introduce a stay-at-home payment in a country short on the only true resource we have: education. We need to invest in improvement of our education infrastructure if we hope to remain economically competitive as a high-wage country. Unfortunately, what we are seeing is exactly the opposite: We are neglecting early childhood education because it’s treated as a voluntary service on the part of the states, one not subject to binding federal quality and infrastructure standards.
Discussions regarding childhood education policy are leading to despondency not only among the public at large but also among education experts. Our problem is not one of realization but of implementation — although one might doubt whether policymakers truly understand the emergency we’re dealing with, given the government’s reversion back to individual funding schemes (child care subsidies, child allowance increases). A recent study carried out by the Mannheim Center for Economic Research once again showed that government investment in early childhood education will pay off, with children from underprivileged families benefiting the most from a higher level of investment.

A recent study by the Ifo Institute for Economic Research estimates that education reform would generate income of €2.8 trillion over the next 80 years, which corresponds to the lifespan of children born today. Conversely, this growth potential will be lost if we fail to redirect education and financial policy toward sustainability. It seems that government is now limiting its focus primarily to bank-bailout and economic stimulus programs that cost billions.

Better to invest early on than pay a lot of money to fix things later

Some 20 percent of 15 year olds in Germany today are considered “highrisk students” with insufficient education. PISA studies have found that these students can read and do math at only the primary school level, which is why they have major problems when they attempt to enter the workforce. Instead of complaining later and carrying out expensive “repair work,” we should be investing in a high-quality early childhood education infrastructure before it’s too late. The time has come for Germany to also reach the early childhood education investment level recommended by the OECD, as safeguarding our future should certainly be worth one percent of our gross domestic product (GDP), rather than the 0.5 percent we spend now.

Reform bottlenecks are holding back clever young minds

Investment in early childhood education isn’t just an economic issue, however, as modern brain research shows that we learn faster during the first few years of our lives than at any time later on. That’s why children from underprivileged backgrounds have a greater risk of dropping out of school and ending up unemployed than do their counterparts who grow up in an environment where they are challenged and stimulated to learn. Early childhood education also lays the foundation for learning processes later on. Our education reform debate focuses much too much on the university level, which is why our current education pyramid should be turned on its head.

With its sternchen daycare centers, Daimler has launched a program to improve Germany’s education system.
“Turf wars” in education policy

The financial strength of municipalities and the views of mayors and other local politicians continue to determine the educational opportunities offered to young children. In this era of globalization, Germany’s federal structure leads to education policy sectionalism: The federal government makes the laws, the states determine the conditions under which they are implemented, and debt-ridden municipalities have to comply with the stipulations and help finance the measures. Binding uniform framework education plans and standards for equipment and personnel qualifications are nowhere to be seen. Germany, the inventor of the kindergarten, has missed the boat. The question is: How much longer can we afford to have 16 different framework education plans holding back our children and closing the door on their opportunities? The answer is that we haven’t been able to afford this for quite some time. Germany today suffers from a glaring lack of educational justice: Instead of soapbox speeches about child poverty, we should be safeguarding educational opportunities for all children, regardless of their social background.

Childcare workers: No degree necessary

German childcare workers are not allowed to work in any other European country for the simple reason that Germany is the only nation in Europe that doesn’t require such workers to have a university degree. Other countries instituted early childhood education reforms in the 1990s that included a reform of daycare worker training; Germany did not. Rather than viewing childhood development between birth and age 12 as a unified system, we have chosen to carve up the education processes, with regard to training as well. If we want to get more men interested in the childcare profession (which would be desirable for attaining a more balanced role model structure for children), we need to improve the profession’s qualifications and pay scales.

The reform bottlenecks, which have only been touched upon here due to the complexity and strong intertwining of social and political interdependencies, compel us to take action. Despite that, a major proposal for reform is nowhere in sight. Those who run the systems have no interest in reform because it would restrict their autonomy, while governments do nothing out of fear that it will cost too much. The expansion of daycare centers for children under age three is proceeding at a snail’s pace, and the chances of getting a spot for a child are similar to those of hitting a lottery jackpot. The quality of new daycare centers to be built has not been much of a topic of discussion in Germany to date. There are reasons for this as well: In the western part of the country at least, there are no specially qualified personnel for the under-three age group, and there is absolutely no agreement regarding other standards, such as orientation periods for new children, daycare facility equipment, meals, and the education concepts to be utilized for children who are not simply to be “held” throughout the day.

Daimler is setting daycare quality standards

Daimler thus made the right decision by consistently focusing on quality at its sternchen centers from the very beginning, as evidenced by a large quality handbook that is continually updated; addresses daycare center structure, operation, and education processes from A to Z; and sets new standards. An appropriate childcare worker-to-children ratio, continuous further training for staff through special sternchen qualification programs, bilingualism, freshly prepared and cooked meals, the inclusion of
handicapped children or those with developmental difficulties, a balanced mix of children from all employee strata, flexible family-friendly hours — all this is a matter of course at sternchen centers.

For a company whose value creation is based on technology, this also means taking children seriously as future researchers and inventors, and providing them with learning opportunities in line with their young age in fields such as the natural sciences. This includes creating a stimulating environment that encourages children to explore their surroundings in a playful manner at a very young age as they discover the difference between hard and soft objects, sweet and sour tastes, and the noises things make, for example. Soon the children will begin asking that allimportant question: “why?”

Even very young children are explorers and researchers — and they want to be taken seriously.

This thirst for knowledge demonstrates the potential in every child: Children literally want to “grasp” their world — and for this they need to carry out vivid and simple experiments with whose help they can uncover the world’s wonders. The little explorers set their own pace and approach here; the job of the grown-ups is to foster, support, and continually stimulate their urge to discover.

None of this can be accomplished without a far-reaching master plan

Children and their families also need to be assigned a higher priority in society and should have their own lobby as well. We need more business leaders to support children and their education as strongly as Daimler does. General recognition of this fact throughout all levels of society would mark an important step in the right direction. Nevertheless, it will be up to business to take action and play a pioneering role as long as the government fails to design and adequately finance a far-reaching, federally standardized master plan for early childhood education. Inaction here means further squandering opportunities for the future. We need a better education infrastructure starting at the daycare and kindergarten level if we are to safeguard Germany’s economic future: Good education is needed from the beginning!

With its sternchen daycare centers, Daimler has launched a program to improve Germany’s education system. Let's hope many other companies follow its lead — and that the government also quickly takes the right steps as a result. Children need both roots and wings, as Goethe said, and they also need to be culturally open and flexible. We must prepare them for a globalized world rife with transformation, and we must also give them the trust and security they need for their self-confidence and stability.