

## Investing in child care can be a sound move for businesses

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AMANDA RIDLEY, Staff Writer [amanda.ridley@shj.com](mailto:amanda.ridley@shj.com) or 562-7221

Ida Thompson is usually one of the first to know when a hospital employee is pregnant.

That's because she runs the child care center at Spartanburg Regional Healthcare System, which has one of the county's most popular waiting lists.

"Parents love it," Thompson said.

Spartanburg Regional is one of the few workplaces in the Upstate to provide quality child care for its employees.

"Parents have even said they made the final decision to work here because of the center," she said. "Others told me they decided not to leave because of it."

The hospital opened the center to recruit and retain employees after experiencing nursing shortages, Thompson said.

### Taking the first step

Other businesses could do the same -- as well as invest in their future work force -- by getting involved in child care, said Thompson, who along with First Steps of Spartanburg County and the Mary Black Foundation is working on an 18-month project to educate business leaders on how to take the first step.

The goal of the study, which will include focus groups of local business leaders, is not to have every Spartanburg business open a child care center, she said.

In fact, that's not what they want at all. Instead, they hope to further conversations on what the business community can do to improve the quality of child care in Spartanburg so that both can benefit.

Through a grant funded by the Mary Black Foundation, First Steps is currently helping 10 Spartanburg County child care centers earn national accreditation.

"This investment is more than just dollars, it's physical changes, it's training, mentoring and much more. And it has been successful," said Curt McPhail, a program officer with the foundation.

"The bottom line is that the children attending these 10 centers are receiving a better early experience and there is no doubt that this is a good investment. We must not forget however that this is just 10 and there are many more. There are many opportunities for partnerships from the business community."

Spartanburg Development Association President Don Woodward said he supports the efforts to open dialogues and create change.

Spartanburg's Economic Development Director Julie Franklin agreed, adding that early childhood development plays several major roles in economic development, including helping recruit workers of today and preparing those of tomorrow.

Both Woodward and Franklin attended last week's third annual Children's Leadership Summit in Greenville, which brought together more than 250 business leaders and child care advocates from across the Upstate to discuss what investing in early childhood development could do for economic development.

"This is an opportunity for the business community to get engaged in an issue that is typically a social issue," Franklin said.

"This is more than a just a social issue. It's a business issue."

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