The Orfalea Child Development Center at Ventura College is a vital hub of learning — from the college students who practice what they learn in textbooks and lectures to the preschool students who learn by playing.

As we celebrate 40 years of serving students, we see that the rewards for students at both ends of the spectrum are great and in ways beyond the obvious. Preschool is key to vibrant communities.

There's a growing body of research that shows children who attend preschool have higher graduation rates, are less dependent on social services and have a better employment outlook, according to First 5 Ventura County.

This helps to build a strong workforce that will impact our region's economy and reduce the academic achievement gap, said to cost the United States an estimated 4 percent of its annual gross domestic product. Students will be better prepared when they enter kindergarten, having been exposed to more social situations and building-block concepts that set the stage for more advanced concepts.

In other words, they will enjoy learning because they've been exposed to it already.

James J. Heckman, an economics professor at the University of Chicago and expert in the economics of human development, wrote: "Investing in early childhood education is a cost-effective strategy for promoting economic growth. Our economic future depends on providing the tools for upward mobility and building a highly educated, skilled workforce. Early childhood education is the most efficient way to accomplish these goals."

At 40 years old, our center is the longest-running one among the county's community colleges. It keeps its doors open through the generosity of multiple funding sources, including the college, parents and outside donors, such as the Orfalea Family Foundation.

Permanent college staff and student instructional aides teach our approximately 75 young students. These student aides, who are preparing for a career in early childhood education, have completed
some coursework in child development and help the lead teachers.

These teachers-in-training are entering an important field, one that starts young children on their educational path and establishes their love of learning. In the classrooms, the college students help children develop skills in pre-reading, writing, math, science, art and music and encourage physical activity — all while having fun.

To the child it's play, to his or her brain it's stimulating intellectual and social development.

Our program is needed in the community. Not only do we have students who are Ventura College employees' children, we have children from the community as well. Our preschool is open to anyone. It's a program that has stood the test of time.

We have Ventura College students in the child development program studying toward their associate degrees who were once preschool students here. We like to think the fond memories brought them back.

The program also prepares the college students for a rewarding career that the Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts will have a higher than average job outlook through 2022. While this is linked to increasing population, let's aim to get a higher percentage of young children in preschool as a proactive strategy for building a vibrant, sustainable community that enjoys great quality of life.

As preschool instructors and student instructional aides, we provide the building blocks for tomorrow's workforce. All in the name of child's play.

Robin Douglas is the Orfalea Child Development Center supervisor at Ventura College.

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Robin Douglas: Preschool fun pays off for our future workforce - VC-Star

http://www.vcstar.com/opinion/columnists/robin-douglas-preschool-fun-...