

The pre-K payoff

Early education helps our kids and our economy both short-term and long-term

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By Bill Isler and William P. Mullen

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In the Pittsburgh region and throughout the state communities are developing comprehensive long-term plans to improve their local economies and quality of life. Such plans focus on programs that promote better jobs, lower crime and reduce the cost of government over the long term.

Since the mid-1990s our business and law-enforcement leaders have understood that investing in Pennsylvania's early-childhood education programs, such as Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, Head Start Supplemental, Keystone STARS, Child Care Works and Early Intervention, are highly effective and cost-efficient in ensuring that children succeed in school and in providing the competent workforce necessary to support economic growth.

Early education also provides a short-term stimulus to the economy. A recent Cornell University study shows that for every \$1 Pennsylvania invests in early childhood programs more than \$2 is circulated throughout local economies through employment and the purchasing of goods and services. It's estimated that more than \$212 million was pumped into the Allegheny County economy in 2007-2008 thanks to Pennsylvania's investment in early-childhood education programs.

Early education is keeping parents working, too. Parents with access to child-care assistance like Child Care Works are up to 15 percent more likely to be employed and stay off public assistance. In Allegheny County, more than 10,400 children from birth to age 5 in lower-income families receive a Child Care Works subsidy each month.

The Pittsburgh public school district has a strong commitment to providing high-quality early-childhood education to preschoolers and it tracks their progress. The district served more than 300 children this past year through Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts and approximately 1,700 children through Head Start and Head Start Supplemental.

These investments are producing results.

Sixty percent of the Pittsburgh public school children who participated in Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts in 2007-2008 and received Early Intervention services made enough progress that they did not require special education services in kindergarten the following year. Over the past four years, 28 percent of children receiving Early Intervention services tested out of special education services in kindergarten. This is a huge cost savings to the district and provides returns 12 times over as children avoid special education from grades 1 through 12.

Teachers and principals say they consistently see the differences in the children who have attended early-education programs because of their ability to handle kindergarten.

Evidence shows that children affected by risk factors such as living in a low-income family or with a parent or parents with little education benefit most from quality early-childhood education. At-risk children who participate in such programs can make significant developmental progress and catch up to their peers before kindergarten.

Studies following children who have participated in quality early-education programs conclude that they do better throughout their school years; are more likely to graduate from high school, attend college or job training programs; have higher earnings, and are more likely to own a home. High school graduation rates go up by as much as 44 percent.

Aside from providing children a better education and career prospects, early education also is important to law enforcement because high-school dropouts are three-and-a-half times more likely than high school graduates to be arrested, and more than eight times as likely to be incarcerated. The U.S. Department of Justice reports that 68 percent of state prison inmates do not hold a high school diploma.

Every \$1 spent on high-quality early education saves \$7 in reduced future expenditures for special education, delinquency, crime control, welfare and lost taxes. The long-term return on investment for quality early education far exceeds historical returns from the stock market, with most benefits being to society at large.

The funding priority decisions that we make for our commonwealth today will have profound consequences for our children's future. We urge our state legislators and Gov. Ed Rendell to continue to invest in Pennsylvania's early-childhood education programs so we can provide our at-risk children with the foundation they need to build a brighter future for themselves and for all of us.

Bill Isler is the president of Family Communications, Inc. and a member of the Pittsburgh school board. William P. Mullen is the sheriff of Allegheny County.

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