

Guest Column: Funding early-childhood education is priority

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Times Guest Columnists

Business leaders and law enforcement share support for a strategy proven to improve academic achievement and workforce development while reducing crime – public investment in early-childhood education programs such as Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, Keystone STARS, Child Care Works, Head Start Supplemental, Early Intervention, and Nurse-Family Partnership.

Law-enforcement leaders agree that hardened violent criminals must be locked up. It is becoming increasingly obvious, however, that we will never arrest and imprison our way out of the crime problem, and we cannot fiscally afford to do so.

Business leaders are concerned about America's future competitiveness in a global marketplace, given that 70 percent of the jobs created in the next 10 years will require a college degree or some education beyond high school.

Across the commonwealth, almost two out of 10 high school students fail to graduate from high school on time. This puts all Pennsylvanians at risk because high school dropouts are more likely to be unemployed than high school graduates, three and one-half times more likely to be arrested, and more than eight times more likely to be incarcerated.

In fact, throughout the country, 68 percent of state prison inmates have not received a high school diploma. Besides the threat to public safety, Pennsylvania's dropouts earn less than high school graduates, pay fewer taxes, and are more likely to consume public assistance.

This trend must change. More than 20 percent of Delaware County's third-graders scored below proficient in reading on the PSSA test this year. We need every child to reach his/her full potential if we expect to compete in a global marketplace.

Quality early-childhood education is proven to provide children with a strong educational foundation so they enter school ready to learn, do well in school, graduate high school on time, attend college or job training programs, and get good jobs.

Evidence from two longterm evaluations of the effects of pre-kindergarten programs show that participating in high-quality pre-kindergarten increases high school graduation rates by as much as 44 percent. The impact of increasing graduation rates is profound. Research shows that if Pennsylvania could raise male graduation rates by 10 percent, the commonwealth would save approximately \$576 million dollars every year, including almost \$364 million in reduced crime costs alone.

Fortunately, Pennsylvania's early-education programs are producing positive results for Pennsylvania's children and families. They are keeping our working parents working, preparing our children for kindergarten and life, and making more quality early learning opportunities available throughout the commonwealth.

In Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, for example, nearly every child (99 percent) showed age-appropriate or

emerging age-appropriate proficiency in literacy, numeracy, and social skills after attending the Pre-K Counts program in 2008-2009. Approximately four times as many children were proficient in language and literacy and mathematical thinking by the end of the school year than upon entry. More than 340 preschoolers participated in Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts in Delaware County this year.

Thousands of at-risk children across Pennsylvania are denied the positive benefits of early childhood education due to lack of funding. In Delaware County alone, more than 1,500 children living in low-income working families are on the waiting list to receive Child Care Works child care assistance.

Pennsylvania's business and law-enforcement leaders recognize that today's children are tomorrow's employees, customers, neighbors, and community leaders. Unfortunately, some will also be tomorrow's juvenile delinquents and adult criminals. We need to invest in their early education to help kids stay on the right track so they can fill our jobs, open their own businesses, buy products and services, and become productive members of our community.

As our state leaders negotiate next year's budget, we urge them to make funding for Pennsylvania's early-childhood education programs a priority.

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