

THEIR VIEW

Early education benefits everyone

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Most law enforcement and business leaders agree: A strategy to help reduce crime and build a competitive future work force is public investment in quality early-childhood education.



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; three and one-half times more likely to be arrested; and more than eight times more likely to be incarcerated than high school graduates. 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 37 percent less than high school graduates, pay less in taxes and are more likely to consume public assistance.

The preparation for children to reach high school graduation begins at birth. Early childhood is the primary window of opportunity when we can provide a strong educational foundation so that children enter school ready to learn; do well in school; graduate high school on time; attend college or job-training programs; and get good jobs.

Fortunately, Pennsylvania's early education programs like Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, Keystone STARS, Head Start Supplemental, Child Care Works and Early Intervention are keeping our working parents working, preparing our children for kindergarten and life, and making more good-quality early learning opportunities available throughout the commonwealth.

For example, the number of STAR 3 and 4 programs in Centre County has increased by 36 percent since last year, making it possible for about 300 more children to receive a higher-quality early learning experience.

About 140 children in Centre County are enrolled in Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts this school year. 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 2008-09. About four times as many children were proficient in language and literacy and mathematical thinking by the end of the school year than upon entry.

Evidence from two long-term evaluations of the effects of prekindergarten programs shows that participating in high-quality prekindergarten increases high school graduation rates by as much as 44 percent.

The impact of increasing graduation rates is profound. According to researchers, a 10 percentage-point increase in graduation rates has historically been shown to reduce murder and assault rates by about 20 percent. If Pennsylvania could raise male graduation rates by 10 percent, the commonwealth would save about \$576 million dollars every year, including almost \$364 million in reduced crime costs alone.

Many Pennsylvania business and law enforcement leaders recognize that today's children are tomorrow's employees, customers, neighbors and community leaders. 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 begin negotiating next year's state budget, we urge them to make funding for Pennsylvania's early education programs a priority.

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