

Early education programs provide foundation for learning

by Lloyd Lamm & Charles Kellar
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Pre-K programs such as this one at Capital Area Head Start at HACC are key to learning and life success many claim.

As our nation faces huge economic challenges, now is the time to recommit to investing in our greatest resource -- our young children -- through quality early education. As our state officials develop the 2009-10 budget, we urge them to make Pennsylvania's quality early education programs such as Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, Keystone STARS, Child Care Works, Early Intervention, Head Start Supplemental and Nurse-Family Partnership a priority.

Pennsylvania's business leaders support continued investment in quality early education because the investment keeps working parents working, it uniquely prepares our young children to succeed in school, and it better prepares our children to become our future work force. According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, U.S. businesses spend more than \$60 billion each year on remedial education and private training to teach people skills and knowledge they should have developed in school.

Law enforcement officials from around the state support quality early education because it helps prevent future crime, makes our communities safer and saves taxpayer dollars. Studies show that high-quality early learning programs increase high school graduation rates by up to 44 percent. 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.

Early childhood is a narrow window of opportunity when we can make a huge impact on a child's social and emotional development and learning for life. Because the development of new brain circuits is at its most intense in the first five years, the same educational investment later in life will never have as great an impact as it does in early childhood.

In contrast, at-risk children who miss this window of opportunity to participate in early learning programs are more likely to need special education and public assistance, are more likely to engage in crime and have lower earnings.

Dauphin County is one of the highest risk counties for children to fail in school. About 37 percent of children live in low-income families and 20 percent of our third-graders scored below proficient on the 2008 PSSA math test. Yet less than half of all children in Dauphin County from birth to age five participate in publicly funded quality early education programs.

Pennsylvania's early education system directly supports our economy today and undoubtedly influences future economic growth by:

+Keeping working families working. Each month, families of more than 2,500 young children in Dauphin County continue to work and build job skills because they have access to Child Care Works. Families with access to assistance such as Child Care Works are up to 15 percent more likely to be employed, stay off welfare and have higher earnings.

+Preparing young children for school. In 2008-09, nearly every child (99 percent) showed age-appropriate or emerging age-appropriate proficiency in literacy, numeracy and social skills after attending the PA Pre-K Counts program. 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. About 500 children in Dauphin County are participating in Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts this year.

+Reducing crime. By the time the children in Nurse-Family Partnership in-home parent coaching program reach 15, both their mothers and the children had about 60 percent fewer arrests than mothers and children left out of the program. Approximately 83 new mothers in Dauphin County were able to give their new babies a better start thanks to the Nurse-Family Partnership in 2007-08.

Please support continued investment in Pennsylvania's early education programs.

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