

To grow, Erie needs quality education

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Residents of Erie County like me and my family care about the health of our communities; we want our children to be able to succeed in school so they can have a better life. I believe a key to their success is quality early education. Recently, I attended the Economic Summit on Early Childhood Investment in Harrisburg. The forum focused on the role early education has on our local economy; 150 business leaders from across the state attended. Wow, what an eye opener!

Today's economy has everyone rattled – fewer jobs and smaller incomes have led to less tax revenue for the state. It is precisely at this moment that we need to invest in programs that will spur economic recovery today and support economic growth in the future. I urge our legislators and Gov. Ed Rendell to keep early education programs like Pennsylvania pre-K Counts, Keystone STARS, Child Care Works, Head Start Supplemental, and Nurse-Family Partnership a priority in the 2009-2010 budget.

Our investment in early education is spurring our economic recovery. A recent Cornell University study shows that for every dollar Pennsylvania invests in early childhood programs such as Child Care Works, Head Start Supplemental, Pennsylvania pre-K Counts and Keystone STARS, more than two dollars is circulated throughout our local economies through employment and purchasing of goods and services. In Erie County, more than \$59 million was circulated into our local economy thanks to Pennsylvania's investment in early childhood education programs in 2007-2008.

Early education is part of a long-term success strategy for work force development and economic growth. Being in the hospitality business, I am acutely aware of the importance of qualified staff. Our company, Scott Enterprises, employs 1,500 people.

Many of our 120 managers started in an entry-level position and moved their way up through the organization. Human capital is one of our biggest assets; at the same time, it is one of our biggest challenges. Everyone on our team needs to be prepared to contribute to our growth and success and that preparation begins at birth.

Quality early learning promotes healthy brain development so that our children have a strong foundation to build their academic and social skills. 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. It is much more effective and less costly to promote healthy development from birth than to try and remediate problems later.

Fortunately, Pennsylvania's early education programs are producing positive results for Pennsylvania's children and families. For example:

- The number of high quality Keystone STAR 3 and 4 programs in Erie County has increased by 38 percent since last year, providing higher quality early learning opportunities to children enrolled in those programs. Approximately 4,500 children in Erie County are enrolled in STARS programs; nearly half of them are in high quality STAR 3 and 4 programs.

- 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 in 2008-2009. Approximately 560 preschoolers in Erie County are enrolled in PA pre-K Counts programs.

Quality early education is especially important for children in Erie County, who are at high risk of school failure due to risk factors such as living in a low-income family or because of the low education level of their parents. Studies show that at-risk children who participate in quality early childhood education programs can make significant developmental progress and catch up to their peers before kindergarten.

Today's children cannot wait for quality early education. There are nearly three times more 45-54 year olds in Erie County than children from birth to age five. When our young children are entering the work force in 15 years, nearly three times as many people could be retiring. If we don't prepare our young children now, how can they help fill these jobs?

Shortsighted businesses are often short-lived businesses. I urge our legislators and Gov. Ed Rendell to take the long view and continue investment in Pennsylvania's early childhood education programs.

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