

# Educating our children is crucial to the economy

**Charlene Friedman**

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Could this be the *best* of times? It's challenging to find any good news lately; consumer confidence is at an all-time low since the Great Depression; statewide unemployment remains at 9.8 percent; housing starts are limping along ... the worst of times. We hope.

The midterm elections were indicative of voter dissatisfaction with the status quo. In Pennsylvania we undoubtedly will see changes in policy and spending. In a similar period in the state, Pennsylvanian Benjamin Franklin said, "Those who are willing to sacrifice liberty for security deserve neither."

While Franklin's statement was intended as a caution for a new nation not to allow fear to influence its policy decisions or governments, clearly there is potential peril ahead.

Credit should go to Sen. Jake Corman, who as chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee defended the state's significant investments in early childhood initiatives. In a pre-election interview he said: "... the most important thing is jobs. We need people investing in central Pennsylvania." Without question, good-quality early education and jobs have a direct correlation.

Illinois and New York have strengthened their states' commitments to Early Learning Investments. Why? According to the national business leader organization America's Edge:

- States generate roughly \$2 in local spending for each dollar spent on good quality early learning
- For every dollar spent in good quality early education programs for at-risk children, as much as \$16 in remediation and criminal costs are saved
- Good-quality early learning saves businesses money through reduced absenteeism and higher employee productivity
- Better preparation to succeed in elementary school leads to higher graduation rates and, ultimately, an improved work force

The Pew Center on the States reported recently on five principles that can help secure states' economic future by enacting smart policies that prioritize proven programs for all state programs.

- Human capital: to improve the work force and community well-being
- Early childhood: The first five years of life are the most critical to spur productive members of society
- Evaluation: Back programs that work; there is extensive research demonstrating the value of early-childhood programs
- Transparency: Budget decisions must be clear and understandable
- Sustainability: Budget with an eye to the future in order to position for long-term growth.

Nobel Laureate economist James Heckman recently recommended that this nation must invest significant resources in proven, good-quality early education programs as a strategy to balance the budget and reduce future debt. He indicated that the key is reaching children before age 5, when their brains are in the highest level of growth and they can overcome risk factors such as poverty and be given a level playing field through school and in life.

By providing good-quality education early, there are higher returns on our investments rather than trying to remediate later. Heckman's research predicts a 10 percent return to society over a child's life in increased productivity and personal achievement.

Pennsylvania has made impressive progress in building an early education system that is high-quality and outcomes-based.

I have learned that good-quality early education bridges the achievement gap before it begins and that it is vital to preparing children for success in school and in life.

If we react in fear to short-term budget challenges without examining what's best for Pennsylvania's future, we will suffer long-term consequences.

What do you expect of this new administration? Make sure your elected officials are willing to give children a strong start so that Pennsylvania can not only compete, but thrive in the new economy.

*Charlene A. Friedman is CFO of Friedman Real Estate Group in State College.*

Read more: <http://www.centredaily.com/2010/12/17/v-print/2408060/educating-our-children-is-crucial.html#ixzz18ODXF9bG>