

Early education pays off

High-quality programs are good for kids, for society and for business

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By James Fish

There are amazing returns on investment when we provide quality early education to our young children. In a time when all budgets are tight, investing in early education programs such as Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, Keystone STARS, Child Care Works, Early Intervention, Head Start and Nurse-Family Partnership will help save money while preparing our children for a competitive workforce.

When kids start behind in school, they often stay behind. Research shows that third-grade performance is an indicator of whether a child will graduate or drop out of high school. A child's early learning experiences can affect whether they go on to get good grades, a good education and a good job -- or instead get poor grades, drop out of school, get involved in crime or possibly end up on welfare, in jail or worse.

When our children fail, it hurts our communities. When they succeed, we all benefit.

Many risk factors can contribute to a child having trouble in school. Some of them, such as living in a low-income family or having a mother with less than a high school education, can be mitigated through quality early education. Allegheny County children overall are considered at moderate to high risk of school failure because of these factors, with 36 percent living in low-income families.

We need a system that makes it possible for all children to succeed.

Research shows that brain development is most intense in the first five years. When we invest in early education, we promote healthy brains that can support the skills needed by adults, such as literacy, math and social awareness. After age six, development slows; it's harder to build the proper nerve connections. So we can invest now in quality early education or pay more later for special education and remediation -- with worse results.

The benefits of early education are long-term. One highly regarded study followed at-risk children who received quality early education until they turned 40 and found that they were more likely to have graduated from high school, attended college and earned high incomes than individuals who did not have quality early education.

Pennsylvania is seeing improvements in early education programs that are very promising for our children's futures.

A 2006 study showed that Keystone STARS had reversed a negative trend of declining quality in child-care programs. In the first two years of Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, nearly every child (94 percent to 99 percent) showed age-appropriate or emerging age-appropriate skills after participating in the program. And since 2003, classroom quality scores have continued to rise in STARS, Pre-K Counts and Head Start classrooms.

We are seeing the results of public investment in quality early education in Pittsburgh, but it is only a start. For example, of the 308 preschoolers who received early-intervention services at 4 years old in 2008-2009, only 34 percent required special-education services when they entered kindergarten this past fall. At the end of last school year, 3.2 percent of Pittsburgh Public Schools kindergarten children were retained, but only 1 percent of those children who attended the district's early-childhood program were retained. This trend was consistent with the previous two years.

These positive results for children represent cost savings to our citizens and the potential of higher academic and career achievement as these children progress through school.

Pennsylvania's investment in early-education programs is working, but more resources are needed.

Only 40 percent of young children in Allegheny County have access to publicly funded high-quality early education. Less than 2 percent of young children are enrolled in Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts programs, approximately 6 percent in Head Start and less than 4 percent in STAR 3 and 4 programs.

Early education may not be a magic pill, but it can lay the foundation for future prosperity for generations. When these children reach adulthood they are more likely to succeed and, as a result, their children are at less risk to fail in school, too.

In the United States, we treasure education. With education and social skills supported in early childhood, a person can break the cycle of poverty and provide a brighter future for their children and grandchildren.

As a business leader, having more children grow up to earn college degrees and hold good jobs means more qualified candidates for employment and more potential customers. Strong communities are good for business. I encourage our policy makers to make quality early education a priority for Pennsylvania.

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