

Early childhood education is Pennsylvania's best investment

By Patriot-News Op-Ed

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Good-paying jobs are central to a strong economy, and those jobs typically require skilled workers with career training and college degrees.

My firm, KPMG, is a perfect example.

As a leading professional services organization, our business depends on the skills of our people. We rely on a highly educated work force of more than 1,000 people in Pennsylvania to create the intellectual capital necessary to provide the audit, tax and advisory services our clients need.



Working on a project, Jamaer Gallman-Meade 5, and his teacher, Kate Slattery talk during a Headstart class at Camp Curtain elementary school. MICHAEL FERNANDEZ/The Patriot-News

The United States is in a global competition for talent. According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, if China and India successfully train less than 10 percent of their population, their skilled work force would be nearly equal to the entire U.S. work force. To remain a vibrant economic center, Pennsylvania and the rest of the United States must produce knowledgeable workers to fill these jobs.

If we want that well-educated work force to attract the employers that will keep our economy vibrant, we must invest in quality early education offered through such programs as Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, Keystone STARS, Child Care Works, Head Start, Early Intervention and Nurse-Family Partnership.

The need is tremendous.

There are about 732,000 children under age 5 in Pennsylvania, but only about one-third have access to publicly funded quality early education programs. Less than 5 percent of our preschoolers are enrolled in a program such as Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, which provides quality pre-kindergarten education to get needy children started on the right track academically.

With about one-quarter of Pennsylvania's third-graders scoring below proficient on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment reading test and nearly one-quarter of our high school students dropping out or not graduating on time, it's essential to provide more quality early learning opportunities if we want to turn these numbers around.

These programs work and there's research to prove it. Nearly every child enrolled in PA Pre-K Counts in the 2008-09 school year exhibited age-appropriate or emerging age-appropriate proficiency in literacy, numeracy and social skills. Since 2003, classroom quality scores have continued to improve in Keystone STARS, Head Start and PA Pre-K Counts classrooms.



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Early education will help assure that our kids stay on track academically. Quality early education helps children build the pre-academic and social skills they need for school at a time when their brains are most receptive. For children who face obstacles such as poverty and are at higher risk of falling behind, quality early education is the best strategy for leveling the playing field.

Research has shown that children who are at risk of school failure make amazing gains in their development during the first five years if they have quality early learning opportunities. They can make up the gap before it even begins.

Pennsylvania's budget battles seem endless, as last year's epic standoff illustrated. Another budget season is almost upon us and policy makers face more difficult choices. But I would submit that quality early education is an investment we must make in any economy. The promise for a brighter future for our state depends on the education of our young children today.

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