

Bort: Future of Erie business is in preschool

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In order for Erie to enjoy a prosperous community and thriving business, we need a qualified work force. The first step in work-force development is quality early education.

Investing in programs such as Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, Keystone STARS, Child Care Works, Early Intervention, Nurse-Family Partnership and Head Start can provide all of our children with the strong start they deserve so they can reach their promise.

As a commercial lender, I work with many small businesses in Erie and hear how they struggle to find qualified employees at every job level. Unfortunately, I hear that many of our high school graduates applying for local jobs today don't have basic reading and writing skills.

In fact, nearly one-third of our 11th graders scored below proficient on their reading PSSA tests, and more than one-quarter scored below proficient on their math PSSA tests in 2009. If we want to reverse this trend, we need to continue investment in quality early education.

Quality early education helps our young children build the language, math and social skills that are necessary to succeed in school and in life.

It is never too early to begin education. By 18 months old, we can already see the achievement gap. Children who do not get a strong start will likely struggle for life.

Erie needs to pay particular attention to our young children's needs. According to the Office of Child Development and Early Learning, Erie County children are at high risk of school failure.

Nearly half of Erie County's young children live in low-income families, and nearly one-fifth are born to mothers with less than a high school education. Forty years of research shows that quality early education can mitigate risk factors and help children made significant progress so that they are on par with their peers by the time they enter kindergarten.

About 40 percent of Erie County's children under age five have access to publicly funded quality early education programs such as Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, Keystone STARS, Early Intervention, Nurse-Family Partnership and Head Start. As a board member of Early Connections, Inc., I know that Pennsylvania's investment in quality early education is working in Erie.

For example, there are 89 children in the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts program at Early Connections here in Erie. The children in these classrooms are from high poverty neighborhoods that statistically have very poor outcomes for children when they are in public school. Of the 75 four-year olds who were in the program in 2008-09, only about 25 percent of the children entered the program with age-appropriate skills.

By the end of the school year, 90 percent of the children had developed age-appropriate skills in literacy, math and social development and were ready for kindergarten. By participating in Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, Keystone STARS and Child Care Works, Early Connections, Inc. is serving about 300 young children in Erie County.



When money is tight, we have to make tough choices. When our economy suffers, we have to cut back. But one area that we cannot cut is the education of our children from birth. If we cut early education, we are increasing our costs for special education, remediation, grade retention, public assistance and corrections.

If we cut early education, we cut our children's future potential, which hurts our local businesses and our local economy. Access to quality early education is absolutely essential to help our young children bridge the achievement gap, break the cycle of poverty, and reach their promise.

I urge our governor and legislators to make quality early education programs such as Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, Keystone STARS, Child Care Works, Early Intervention, Nurse-Family Partnership and Head Start a priority as you decide 2011's budget.

BETSY BORT is vice president of Commercial Lending with Eriebank, responsible for developing, managing and enhancing business relationships in the community. She is active in several nonprofit organizations in the Erie area, including board president of Early Connections Inc.