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Quality early childhood education boosts children, parents, economy

July 22, 2012

Quality early childhood education boosts children, parents, economy , The Altoona Mirror

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By Daniel B. Hoover

Our region's businesses are proud to support local schools. The business community requires quality future employees, but more importantly, we want to sustain our region by helping children grow into the good citizens and neighbors of tomorrow.

In recent years, we have learned that early childhood is even more crucial to children's growth than the school years. Children must be ready to learn when they enter kindergarten, making birth through age 5 a critical time for developing strong academic and social foundations.

Research on the developing brains of young children is a real eye-opener. Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child discovered that young children exposed to enriching environments are building genetic capabilities for learning.

In a 2010 paper on long-term development, these researchers said, "The experiences children have early in life - and the environments in which they have them - shape their developing brain architecture and strongly affect whether they grow up to be healthy, productive members of society."

Other Harvard research shows that 90 percent of the brain's capabilities for teamwork, critical thinking, problem-solving and communications form between birth and age 5. Employers will require these very skills when children become adults.

The Blair County Board of Child Advocates oversees the county's outstanding Head Start system, with its 100 dedicated employees delivering high-quality early learning to at-risk kids.

As a longtime board member and chairman, I have seen the huge difference that quality early childhood education makes. When attention is paid to their needs, children make remarkable progress despite hardships. In school, they are less likely to repeat a grade and more likely to graduate from high school.

More remarkably, Head Start helps parents grow and thrive.

We all know that our own parenting approach is a product of how we were parented, but many Head Start parents were never inculcated with that knowledge.

Through Head Start, they get guidance in parenting, and as they get involved in their children's learning and development - a requirement for Head Start enrollment - they build self-esteem. The process helps break the cycle of poverty and dependence.

To some degree, I believe that we are fighting today's budget battles because we as a nation haven't done enough to help more people become productive, earn income and pay taxes. That's why



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many Blair County business people were pleased that Gov. Tom Corbett and the state Legislature retained Pennsylvania's financial commitment to preschool and parental support programs, such as Pre-K Counts, Keystone STARS, Child Care Works, Nurse-Family Partnership, Parent-Child Home Program and Head Start Supplemental.

As the economy improves, lawmakers are sustaining their commitment to young children and Pennsylvania's future economic development.

Local business people are so passionate about this issue that we are forming a group to support quality early childhood education, in the same tradition of supporting K-12. On Sept. 28, the Blair County Chamber of Commerce will host a mini-symposium, sharing research on the links between young children's development and economic growth.

Investing in quality early childhood education is probably the best investment possible for assuring an effective local workforce.

Children who lack literacy and language skills by third grade will probably never catch up. Without quality early learning, they are likelier to require special education, drop out of school, engage in crime or rely on public assistance. A good start makes them likelier to graduate from high school, pursue higher education, and earn higher lifetime salaries and benefits.

In short, they have the skills needed to achieve in school and the workplace. Quality early childhood education provides the priceless opportunity to nurture the talents of the next generation and help children mature into responsible citizens.

Daniel B. Hoover is president of Roaring Spring Blank Book Co. and a member of the Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission.

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