



Investments in quality early childhood education offer strong return on investment

August, 2, 2012 2:00am
By Corbin Kearns

Every summer, state lawmakers must look far into the future while making decisions regarding the upcoming budget year. It's a delicate balancing act, and one that businesses know well. Business people constantly address immediate needs while planning ahead for the years, and even the decades, to come.

This year, business leaders were pleased that Gov. Tom Corbett and the Pennsylvania legislature largely protected the state's investment in quality early childhood education, even with it being a difficult budget year. The need for services was rising, with lawmakers forced to allocate scarce resources. The preservation of funds for quality early childhood education signaled support for initiatives that promise both short- and long-term benefits.

The challenge, now and in the future, is to sustain that support. Quality early childhood education makes perfect sense from a return-on-investment perspective. The years from birth to age 5 are critical for children's development. Their brains are building 90 percent of their lifetime capacity for communications, teamwork, problem-solving, and critical thinking. In addition, their social and academic foundation is being laid, so that they are ready to learn when they enter school.

However, some children lack that foundation because they didn't receive enriching experiences early in life. Harvard researchers have shown that children who reach third grade without literacy and language skills will never catch up. Until third grade, children learn to read. After that, they read to learn. We can spend on remediation to try to bring those students to grade level, but there's no guarantee of success. A broken child isn't something that's easily fixed later. Spending money sooner on quality early learning prevents the need for costlier remediation later on.

The strong return on investment continues for decades. Children from quality early childhood education are likelier to graduate from high school, pursue higher education, and earn higher salaries and benefits. Without exposure to quality early learning, they are likelier to engage in substance abuse, commit crimes, and depend on government assistance.

Research from the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis shows that every dollar invested in quality early childhood education saves \$16 in the long run by reducing costs for remedial education, crime, and welfare. Distinguished economics researcher James J. Heckman, PhD., of the University of Chicago, found that an \$8,000 investment at birth returns nearly \$800,000 over the child's life.

In the community, the benefits ripple into a stronger economy. Even today, businesses have a difficult time filling jobs that require technical proficiency. Businesses choose to locate where they can draw from a strong pool of talent, but it's no secret that there's a skills gap in Pennsylvania. Quality early childhood education won't directly give our region more electricians and mechanics, but these investments create an environment where more children have opportunities to graduate from high school, build career skills, join an ever-expanding talent pool, and fill the jobs and leadership positions that are waiting for them. In this long-term view, companies have a steady pipeline of potential employees, and communities are home to thriving businesses and productive citizens.

The preservation of most of Pennsylvania's high-quality early learning programs in the 2012-13 budget -- Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, Keystone STARS, Child Care Works, Nurse-Family Partnership, Parent-Child Home Program, and Head Start Supplemental -- demonstrates our commitment to giving children a strong start in life. It's one of the best investments we can make for our current and future economic development, and it deserves our ongoing, sustained support.

Corbin J. Kearns is plant manager of Johnson Matthey, Inc., Smithfield, and a member of the Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission.