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Investing in early education pays off for lifetime

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By Ann C. Crouter and Charlene A. Friedman

Centre County is home to a diverse mix of business — small and large, town and gown. We are fortunate to be employers in this economic melting pot. In our positions, we approach employment from different perspectives, but we share a concern about a potential obstacle to rebuilding the economy and sustaining long-term growth.

As with other employers in Centre County and in Pennsylvania, we want to hire top talent, but the pool of workers trained in demanding, high-level skills is dwindling. We compete with businesses and universities nationwide for the best people. We can offer exciting career opportunities, but if the surrounding community lacks the essentials for good quality of life, talented individuals won't join our teams.

And when the best candidates go elsewhere, businesses follow, attracted to the regions where other similarly trained employees are located.

Despite the lingering economic downturn, this is the time to be proactive with investments that solve this problem.

Quality early childhood education, with immediate and lasting benefits, is essential to that proactive approach. Recently, we joined 180 Pennsylvania business leaders in Harrisburg for an economic summit on early childhood.

Top researchers and analysts shared their findings, including the science behind brain development showing that 90 percent of the foundation for communications, critical thinking, problem-solving and teamwork develops by age 5. They also shared economic data on the return on investment in quality early childhood education.

Rigorous studies tracking children from preschool into adulthood reveal that investments in quality early learning have tangible, sizeable benefits. Children from high-quality programs are less likely to need special education or be retained a grade in school. They're more likely to succeed academically, graduate from high school, pursue higher education, and earn higher salaries and benefits.

Correspondingly, they are less likely to engage in crime or need public assistance.

Society saves about \$16 for every \$1 invested in quality early learning. Investing \$8,000 at birth returns \$800,000 over the individual's life. The savings begin immediately, yielding a local return of \$2.16 through employment and consumer spending for every dollar invested.

As Centre County employers, we see the powerful impact of quality early childhood education. Potential hires thinking of moving to the region — including graduate students with families — want assurances that quality child care and preschools are available. Current employees work more productively when they are

certain that their children's physical, educational, social and emotional needs are being met.

Quality early childhood education doesn't happen by chance. Pennsylvania government has a highly regarded system of investments, planning and coordination that raises the quality of care to standards firmly rooted in early childhood development research. Here in Centre County, nearly 40 percent of children younger than 5 are fortunate to experience quality, publicly funded programs, but 55 percent live in economically at-risk families, according to the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning.

Clearly, the system doesn't meet the need. Centre County will be in a much more competitive situation to attract business and talented individuals when all children have access to high-quality care. As employers, we are doing our part, but our capabilities are limited. The state must continue growing the initiatives that assure quality early childhood education for every family that needs it.

When we do that, Centre County and Pennsylvania will attract more businesses and become more competitive in the global workforce. We will benefit from the education of children who are likelier to mature into contributing members of the workforce and our community. In the long run, the presence of a talented workforce that has benefited from a lifetime of investment in high-quality education will continue to attract employers to our region.

Ann C. Crouter is the Raymond E. and Erin Stuart Schultz dean of the Penn State College of Health and Human Development, where her research focus includes the impact of work experiences on health, family and parenting. Charlene A. Friedman is CFO of Friedman Real Estate Group, State College, a commercial investment real estate company operating in Centre County since 1978. They sit on the Governor's Early Learning Investment Commission.

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