

Quality Early-Childhood Education Investments Needed Now

By Denise S. Cesare

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This nation faces a frightening prospect. Our lack of investment in early childhood education adversely impacts this country's ability to create high-value jobs and compete globally. When we don't value investments in children early on in life, it has adverse implications.

High-quality early childhood education prepares young children for success in school. At a time when their young brains are growing and developing rapidly, it imparts instruction and stimulation that build lifetime capabilities for learning. When they enter school ready to learn, they are likelier to stay on pace academically, graduate from high school, pursue college or career training, and enter our communities as productive citizens.

Without quality early learning, the opposite happens. Disadvantaged children, especially, enter school behind their peers developmentally and stay behind, eventually dropping out of school, going on welfare, and getting tangled up with the law.

A lack of investment in early education has such far-reaching negative connotations that, to me, it's almost mind-boggling. It's common sense to say that you invest where you have to make the least amount of investment for the greatest payoff. Instead, we're paying vastly larger amounts in the back end.

U.S. businesses demand employees who can tackle increasingly complex tasks, with 60 percent of new jobs requiring skills in the STEM areas of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. The health care insurance industry is just one example of an industry becoming more and more analytic. We are moving to pay-for-value for health care, as opposed to pay-for-procedure. Determining value - the progress accruing from a course of treatment - requires high-level analytics, risk assessment, stronger math capabilities, strong problem solving, and good communications.

And yet, the U.S. Commerce Department says that we're facing a shortage of people qualified to fill jobs requiring STEM skills - something that every employer is acutely aware of. Again, it's frightening to contemplate, especially when our competitor nations, such as China and India, are investing in early childhood and developing their people to fill those jobs.

Employers want talent who will take their businesses to the next level. We want people who have a sense of ownership, and not a sense of entitlement. When customers call our businesses with questions or problems, we want them to encounter people equipped with the drive and the intuition to get to the heart of the issue and untangle the situation. Those people don't spring, fully formed, from the high school commencement ceremony. The earlier we invest, and the earlier that young people begin to understand their potential, the better. They must take ownership of themselves and whom they are working for. That's something I think we're dangerously missing.

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I am also in the wellness business, and the less educated people are, the less they understand the value of wellness and the importance of taking care of their health. That understanding starts very early. Without it, you have more teen pregnancies, which lead to another uneducated generation. Knowing what to do and how to care for yourself is a critical element in building whole communities of wellness-aware people.

Let's get to the root of the problems. Education is huge in this effort, and education starts at the beginning of life, in the years before children enter kindergarten.

It's often said that we are a nation looking for immediate returns. When the repercussions of a problem aren't imminent, everyone kicks that can down the road. It's time we picked up this particular can and dealt with it. In fact, we are making some progress. Pennsylvania has done an outstanding job of bringing this issue to the forefront. I applaud and support Gov. Tom Corbett's proposed investment in early childhood education. Children at risk of failing in school should have the opportunity to be served through high-quality early learning programs.

By investing now, and maintaining our commitment for the long term, we can assure healthier people, healthier businesses, and healthier communities for years to come.

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