

Quality early childhood education fosters economic development and entrepreneurship

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Attracting businesses. Growing businesses. Fostering entrepreneurs. There's no magic formula that makes one region more attractive for economic development than another. Still, some critical factors must be in place to stimulate business activity and the insatiable quest for the next big thing.

Here in the Greater Susquehanna Valley, we've seen our share of entrepreneurs who took brilliant ideas and nurtured them into thriving businesses, the basis of good, family-sustaining jobs. We've seen businesses adapt with changing times, so those jobs stick around.

We've also seen businesses close their doors, throwing hundreds of people out of work. We've seen businesses consider siting in the region and then settling elsewhere, not satisfied that the requirements for success are in place.

One constant factor weaves through these scenarios. It's the availability of educated, creative people to run the assembly lines, program the computers, answer the phones, sell the products, and contribute new ideas. Businesses want to tap into the energy and work ethic of people who are educated and agile. They take a pass on any region where people lack strong educational foundations and can't adapt to change.

We invest billions in education from kindergarten through 12th grade. Of course, that's appropriate, but the K-12 funding surge is based on the old idea that young children could learn little more than their ABCs and colors.

However, amazing scientific research has opened new windows into the workings of the brain. By age 5, children develop more than 90 percent of the foundation for communications, critical thinking, problem-solving, and teamwork, according to Harvard University. These skills form the foundation for learning and socialization to come.

These amazing transformations don't happen automatically. Brain science tells us that young children need proper stimulation and encouragement to build strong neural connections and social skills.

Studies also show that young children living in poverty are at greatest risk of entering kindergarten not ready to learn. Quality early childhood education can counter the detrimental factors in the lives of at-risk children. Again, the science proves it. The structured, research-based play and interaction offered in a quality early learning center help children overcome the disadvantages of poverty. When they enter school, they are less likely to need remedial education or special help.

Sadly, of 50 children who have trouble reading in first grade, 44 will still have trouble in fourth grade.ⁱ And if they're still reading well below grade level by then, they are much less likely to graduate from high school.ⁱⁱ

Among Columbia, Montour, Northumberland, Snyder, and Union counties, the rates of young children living in economically at-risk families range from a low of 69 percent in Columbia County to a high of 80 percent in Snyder County. That's compared to a state average of 59 percent. Are we supposed to just write off these children?

I would hope not. This is not a political or ideological issue. It's about a community committing to helping every at-risk young child overcome the debilitating effects of poverty and build strong foundations for learning and socialization.

In the blink of an eye, the young children we've helped prepare for learning become the desirable workers sought by new and innovating businesses. This area can continue to foster its entrepreneurial spirit. Maybe the next Weis Markets will soon plant roots in this fertile valley. Maybe a company doesn't close its doors due to the changing economy but pulls together its team and adapts, emerging stronger than ever.

These businesses exist, but they must be assured a steady supply of team-capable, job-ready people. If we invest in children from birth, businesses will come here and stay here. That's the road to prosperity, and it's the path we should all be following.

ⁱ Partnershipforsuccess.org, Pew Center for the States

ⁱⁱ American Educational Research Journal, as cited by National Association of Workforce Boards