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Local Voices: Quality early learning critical



My company has been in hiring mode for 20 years, growing about 20 percent a year. In all those years, most of the labor pool has been based in the Altoona region. We expect to keep growing for the next 20 years, and I can say with confidence that now is the time to invest in high-quality early childhood education, right here in our community.

High-quality early childhood education programs help children build foundations for learning and socialization. They help children enter school ready to learn and become more likely to graduate from high school, obtain postsecondary or career education, hold down good jobs, and become productive, contributing citizens.

Without quality early learning, disadvantaged children enter school 12 to 18 months developmentally behind their peers. The National Institute for Early Education Research notes that, until third grade, children learn to read. After that, they read to learn. Studies show that if they are well below grade level in reading by fourth grade, they will probably not graduate from high school. Long-term studies tracking children from high-quality early childhood programs into adulthood have found lower rates of substance abuse and involvement with the criminal justice system.

In quality programs, teachers are trained in the science of the developing brain, and activities are structured to stimulate proper neurological growth and social skills. Young children receive nurturing experiences while, according to Harvard University, they are developing 90 percent of their capabilities for teamwork, critical thinking, problem-solving and communication. These are the attributes that industries need in order to keep growing and stay agile in a global business climate.

In fact, the U.S. Department of Commerce predicts 17 percent growth in STEM-related jobs – those requiring expertise in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics -- over 10 years but a shortfall in qualified people to fill them. Emerging research shows that quality early learning cultivates the innate curiosity of young children, and their exposure to math concepts is a strong predictor of their later abilities in math and other subjects. This early learning prepares children to succeed in STEM studies – and fill those in-demand jobs -- as they grow.

For 20 years, my company has been engaged in career exploration activities in schools, and it has become clear that 11th or 12th grade is usually too late to start the process. So are eighth grade and third grade. Education doesn't just start early in life. It starts at the very beginning.

Maintaining a deep talent pool that allows my business and all businesses to hire quality employees when we need them is crucial to continued growth. Our people need the abilities to reason, effectively communicate, perform logic, and work in teams. The skills demanded of them grow more complex every year, and yet, too many of our young people are not preparing to fill these jobs. Here in Blair County, 75

percent of children under age 5 are living in economically at-risk families, compared to 60 percent statewide, according to the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning.

Quality early learning instills the skills that businesses demand, and this issue has broad support from employers in Pennsylvania and across the country. I applaud and support Gov. Corbett's proposed investment in early childhood education and agree that more children at risk of failing school should have the opportunity to be served through high-quality early learning programs.

Investing in quality early learning helps children overcome disadvantages and join the talent pool ready to work. It's healthy for economic development, and it's fantastic for kids who start life on a path to learning and success.

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