

## An investment in the future

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June 22, 2013



A Greater Susquehanna Valley United Way initiative called Priorities for Impact seeks to resolve the causes of societal problems in Northumberland, Snyder, and Union counties. Among the many goals, as part of their strategic plan is this critical priority -- to enroll 15 percent more children in high-quality early childhood education by 2016.

Going from 959 children to 1,103 might not seem like much, but the ripple effect is enormous. Decades of research prove the effectiveness of investments in quality early learning. In the years from birth to age 5, the brains of young children are growing and developing rapidly. Building 700 neural synapses a second, they are constructing the basis for lifetime learning.

Still, we know that not all children receive the right kinds of stimulation and targeted teaching meant to promote proper growth. By age 3, children of many parents receiving public assistance have vocabularies of about 500 words, compared to 1,000 for children of college-educated parents.

Quality early learning helps close the gap, preparing all children to enter school ready to learn. Unfortunately disadvantaged children enter school 12 to 18 months developmentally behind their peers. If they struggle to read in first grade, most will probably still struggle by fourth. And if they're well below grade level in reading at fourth grade, their prospects of graduating from high school are greatly diminished.

As the National Institute for Early Education Research reports, from birth to about third grade, **children learn to read**. After that, **they read to learn**, so if they're behind in reading by then, they are more likely to trail in all their academic subjects.

The research also shows that disadvantaged children who didn't receive high-quality early childhood education can be somewhat more likely to have the tendency to abuse alcohol and drugs. In addition some may also get involved in the criminal justice system.

On the other hand, children who experience quality early learning programs are more likely to do well in school, graduate, attend college or obtain career training, and enter society as contributing, productive citizens. Children are born learning. Scientific studies have shown that 90% of the brain's development happens before the age of 5, before kindergarten. They also acquire social skills as well as the capacity for teamwork, communications, problem-solving, and critical thinking.

In the 2012 state budget, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections spent \$1.9 billion. We're building more prisons, not investing in education and especially not enough in quality early education. To me, there's something wrong with that equation. Our state and communities can step up and commit to quality early learning, for a much better return on investment. In Pennsylvania, every dollar invested in high-quality early childhood education returns \$2.06 to

communities in local spending. Eminent economist Dr. James Heckman, of the University of Chicago, found that investments in quality early childhood education have a long-term rate of return of 8 percent to 10 percent a year. This is a return on investment that really makes business sense. We need to understand that spending on early learning for our children is not an expense, but rather an investment.

We have reached the time when the vast Baby Boomer workforce is retiring. Their jobs are available, and yet, as the Wall Street Journal reported in 2012, employers nationwide can't find qualified people to fill over 600,000 job openings.

All of this comes along as the workplace is shifting dramatically, moving away from manufacturing and toward the highly technical STEM fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Emerging research shows that quality early learning sustains the innate curiosity of children, preserving it so children can continue exploring complex math and science concepts. In fact, their early exposure to math is a strong predictor of later learning. As more STEM jobs are created in the U.S. economy, quality early learning can help fill this looming shortage.

In construction, a strong foundation is crucial to the strength of any building. The same can be said for people. The foundation of any successful society is built in early childhood. I applaud and support Gov. Tom 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.

The reasoning behind prioritizing quality early childhood education may seem like a straightforward business proposition – to build a strong workforce. Investments in quality early childhood education help build human capital for our future. But more importantly, the benefits accrue to families and to communities. Investments in children are investments in the future of this country. We need to reach the children we are leaving behind and must deliver all the needed resources we can muster.

***Norman Rich is the Retired President & CEO, Weis Markets, Inc., and a member of the Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission.***