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'Opportunity' starts with quality learning services

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Editor's note: P. Timothy Phelps is Executive Director, Transportation Management Association of Chester County, and a member of the Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission.

In the public transportation sector, "opportunity" isn't just a buzzword. It describes a real chance for people to access jobs, health care, schools, museums, and cultural events. Opportunities lead to growth, fulfillment, and productive citizenship.

High-quality early childhood education also offers opportunity with the genuine potential to change lives. Young children who receive quality early learning services are more likely to succeed in school and become contributing members of the community.

Quality early learning provides children with enrichment and guided activities that support their brain growth of 700 neural synapses a second. Those synapses become the foundation for lifetime learning. The years from birth to 5 are also when children build 90 percent of their capabilities for teamwork, communications, critical thinking, and problem-solving, according to Harvard University.

Decades of research prove that children who enter school ready to learn as a result of quality early learning are less likely to require remedial or special education. They are more likely to graduate from high school, pursue college or career training, and become productive members of society.

The benefits of quality early learning are especially critical for children at risk of failing in school due to such factors as poverty and low maternal education. Those who enter school behind their peers academically become part of an achievement gap that is "difficult and costly to close," according to economist James D. Heckman, of the University of Chicago. If they remain well below grade level in reading by the end of fourth grade, they probably will not graduate from high school.

At-risk children who weren't given quality early learning opportunities are more likely to engage in substance abuse, get involved in the criminal justice system, and require public assistance. Deprived of stable relationships in the critical early years, they are also likelier to endure psychological issues and serious health problems later in life, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

By developing human capital, investments in quality early childhood education offer returns of 7 percent to 10 percent a year, according to Heckman.

Emerging research also shows the role of quality early learning in preserving children's innate curiosity – a characteristic essential for learning the skills needed in the STEM fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. In an

increasingly competitive global marketplace, STEM expertise is crucial to economic development, and yet, the U.S. Department of Commerce predicts a shortage in people qualified to fill STEM-related jobs. Quality early learning grooms young children for further learning of complex concepts and fills that looming workforce gap.

Seeing my own daughter grow up has opened a window into the amazing leaps in learning that happen, seemingly, from one day to the next. Many children are fortunate to have parents able to promote their learning from birth, but here in Chester County, one young child in three lives in an economically at-risk family, according to the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning.

Through my work as a chamber president and now as the Executive Director of TMACC, I have seen first-hand how quality early childhood programs helped at-risk children and their families overcome obstacles to learning. When children start on the right path early in life, the entire community gains productive citizens and a strong workforce.

Gov. Tom Corbett and the state legislature recognized the benefits by including meaningful investments in quality early childhood education in the 2013-14 state budget. This commitment deserves applause, recognizing early childhood's proven investment value for academic achievement and economic development. Thank you to the leadership that both the Senate and House members of Chester County have provided for our children. Pennsylvania continues to be on the cutting edge by investing in our children, the future workforce of Pennsylvania.

Sustained commitments such as this give at-risk children the opportunities to enter school ready to learn and to succeed for life, upholding Chester County's standing as a great place to live and work.

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