

# Business Forum: Quality early learning fills regional talent pool with capable workers

August 10, 2013 12:08 am

By James F. Glunt /

When businesses hire, they draw most of their talent from surrounding areas. This is a lesson I've learned from my years in employment law. Whether a company is headquartered in Pittsburgh or brings a significant presence here, three quarters of its workforce probably lives within a 75-mile radius.

Viewed from that perspective, the region's economic health depends on a talent pool filled with capable, dynamic people. The deeper the pool, the more choices employers have to fill increasingly complex positions.

The need for top talent is sure to grow, which is why we must invest in high-quality early childhood education today. Decades of research confirms the benefits of investments. From birth to age 5, young brains need developmentally appropriate stimulation to build the capacity for learning.

Children who experience high-quality early learning are likelier to succeed in school, graduate from high school, obtain higher education or career training, and earn higher salaries. Their future employers might be astounded to learn that 90 percent of their capabilities for teamwork, communications, problem-solving and critical thinking -- the very skills that businesses demand -- are formed by age 5.

Many human resources professionals doing the hiring for businesses today will still be hiring 20 years from now. By focusing on early learning in our state, we improve the skills of people who will one day be recruited as employees.

Expanding access to quality early learning means that businesses will have a deeper candidate pool to draw from when that day comes. From there, it's easy to conclude that our region has created the strongest possible economy. Existing businesses grow and create jobs; new businesses locate here.

Children who don't receive quality early learning -- especially those at risk due to low to moderate family income -- enter school trailing their peers by as much as 18 months, developmentally. If they can't read at grade level by fourth grade, it will be very difficult to catch up. And yet, all learning evolves from reading.

More than 40 years of research shows that children without high-quality early childhood education are likelier to fall behind academically, drop out of high school, abuse alcohol and drugs, require public assistance, and become tangled in the criminal justice system. Their absence from the workforce depletes

the local talent pool.

Among Allegheny County's 63,640 children ages birth to 5, nearly 60 percent are from economically at-risk families, under 300 percent of poverty, according to the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning. Only 43 percent participate in publicly funded quality early education.

Business leaders in Pennsylvania and throughout the U.S. are calling for strengthened investments that fill the unmet need and extend quality early learning to more children, especially those at risk of failing in school. The federal government is proposing a major investment to assure high-quality early learning for every at-risk 4-year-old -- those living at or below 200 percent of poverty.

Here in Pennsylvania, I support the meaningful investments made by Gov. Tom Corbett and the state Legislature in the 2013-14 state budget, and I agree that more children, especially those at risk of failing in school, should have the opportunity to experience high-quality early learning programs.

I am also pleased to join more than 200 business leaders nationwide in signing an open letter from ReadyNation in support of public investments in early childhood. As the letter said, early childhood education is "an American competitiveness issue that impacts all of us."

We see it right here at home. Southwestern Pennsylvania is renowned for its economic vitality. Focusing resources on the first five years of life is essential to creating a system of learning and development that will meet the needs of young people and help cultivate the highly skilled employees required to sustain our reputation as the home of a deep and richly diverse talent pool.

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First Published August 10, 2013 12:00 am