

Opinion

Letter: Children need high-quality early learning to thrive

Monday, June 24, 2013

By JAMES R. WADDINGTON Jr.
and DENNIS L. BENCHOFF
Times Guest Columnists

This nation has a gap undermining our security and economic development. The gap exists between critical jobs and the people with the skills and education to fill them. In the pie chart of working-age individuals, the slice representing the desirable talent needed to continually refresh our military branches and industries is shrinking. The slice representing lost opportunities — those who never acquired the academic and people skills needed for success — is growing.

The U.S. Department of Defense reports that 75 percent of Americans ages 17 to 24 don't qualify for military service due to their criminal records, failure to meet educational standards, or physical barriers such as obesity. The 25 percent of youth available to the military is also sought after by business. The defense industry — and all U.S. business sectors — need team-ready, highly skilled workers to be competitive.

The number one key to national security is a solid economy, and a solid economy depends on a skilled, diversified, and creative workforce. As military and defense-industry leaders, we agree that high-quality early childhood education starts children on the path to success. That first step is critical to assuring that young children are school-ready, and that they emerge from childhood workplace-ready, military-ready, and lifetime-ready.

Children who experience high-quality early learning build a strong foundation for learning. They are more likely to succeed academically, graduate from high school, and avoid risky behaviors such as drug and alcohol use. They are also more likely to attend college and earn higher wages. They are less likely to need welfare or be imprisoned. Instead of draining from society, they contribute. Every dollar invested in high-quality early education returns up to \$2.17 in local spending immediately, and up to \$16 long-term.

High-quality early childhood education, where play and learning align, also instills those "soft skills" that employers demand. By age 5, children develop 90 percent of their capacity for communications, critical thinking, problem-solving and teamwork.

Children are natural-born scientists, inquisitive and persistent. The curiosity, creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving of early childhood — all of them cultivated in quality early learning activities — transform into the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) skills that the military branches, defense industries, and most other fields increasingly demand.

Here, we must discuss a core problem. In Pennsylvania, only 28 percent of 3- and 4-year-olds from families with incomes under 300 percent of poverty have access to high-quality prekindergarten. And yet, children from low- to moderate-income families are most at risk of entering school not ready to learn, up to 18 months behind their peers in development. Support for high-quality early childhood education has been bipartisan and enduring, but it hasn't reached the children who need it most.

In fact, this issue has broad support from the business community not only in Pennsylvania but across the country. We endorse 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. It's time to make these investments because other countries are outpacing the U.S. in high-quality early childhood education investments, and the research is clear: High-quality early childhood programs can have a significant short- and long-term impact on children's lifelong success and on our economy.

We can't afford to lag. We must invest in the natural-born talents of our children. And when they're grown — which happens in the blink of an eye — we'll happily welcome them to serve on our bases and in our factories and offices, making the U.S. stronger through a ready military and vibrant economy.

James R. Waddington, Jr., is Director of Strategy and Operations, IS&GS Defense, Lockheed Martin, and a member of the Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission. Retired Lieutenant General Gen. Dennis L. Benchoff is a former chief of staff for US Army Recruiting Command, an adjunct professor of mathematics at Harrisburg Area Community College and sits on the Executive Advisory Council of Mission: Readiness.

URL: <http://www.delcotimes.com/articles/2013/06/24/opinion/doc51c902ee96c2d846183182.prt>

© 2013 delcotimes.com, a **Journal Register** Property