

The Express

Today's News Today

Strengthen early childhood education

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It's time to rally around quality early childhood education



Denise Cesare

Northeast and Central Pennsylvania are famous for their work ethic and can-do spirit. By combining forces, we can accomplish anything.

We believe strongly that productive, engaged and educated individuals are the building blocks of a strong community, but today, too many individuals are not reaching their potential. As a result, the region's economic vitality suffers.

How can we recapture the potential of every citizen? Together, we are issuing a call for communities to unite around a critical piece of the solution: Strengthening early childhood education. Other communities have done it, and we certainly can. In Erie, the Lehigh Valley, the Greater Susquehanna Valley, Mercer County, York, and other Pennsylvania communities, diverse partnerships of business leaders, foundations, and community organizations are boosting the quality and availability of early childhood education.



Peter Danchak

Decades of research substantiate the need for action. Almost 90 percent of the brain is developed by age 5, laying the groundwork for lifetime academic and social success. Scientists have accumulated evidence into the benefits of high-quality early learning and we can now see a direct link between pre-kindergarten experiences and high school graduation rates. Research shows that disadvantaged children who lack high-quality early childhood education can start school up to 18 months behind their peers. If they aren't ready for kindergarten, they are half as likely to read well by third grade. If they're not reading proficiently by third grade, they are four times more likely to drop out of school without graduating.



David Hawk

Newer studies show that young children in high-quality early learning settings are building the capacity to grasp more complex science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) concepts in later years. These skills are needed to fill the STEM-related jobs that increasingly power our economy. High-quality programs also help young children develop the core character traits that will make them more desirable employees and better citizens, including stronger focus and self-control, better communication and critical thinking skills, and the ability to work in teams and to engage in self-directed learning.



**Judge
Chester Harhut**

These skills are invaluable to the businesses we represent - Blue Cross of Northeastern Pennsylvania, Gertrude Hawk Chocolates, and PNC Bank. All of our companies benefit from a

workforce of people who are well-prepared for opportunities because they developed cognitive reasoning abilities and the foundation for learning from an early age.

Early learning also directly impacts our judicial system, because at-risk children from quality early childhood programs are much less likely to become involved in crime as teens and young adults. In Pre-K Counts, Pennsylvania's highest-quality early childhood education program, the number of children with conduct or self-control problems fell by 80 percent - a critical point, since 60 percent of young children with high levels of disruptive, aggressive behaviors will later show high levels of delinquent and antisocial behavior.

Throughout Pennsylvania, community leaders have developed strategies to enhance the quality and accessibility of early childhood education locally. Sharing research, educating families, providing scholarships and higher-education tuition assistance for early childhood teachers - these are just a few of the initiatives we could replicate in our hometowns. It's time for us to work together to help strengthen early childhood education here in Northeast Pennsylvania.

At the state level, we know that tough economic times require difficult choices to be made by our policy makers. Governor Corbett's proposed 2014-15 state budget includes increased funding for evidenced-based early childhood programs such as Pre-K Counts.

The proposed funding reaps strong, measurable dividends in children's academic achievement and their lifetime success. We all benefit, and it's time for everyone to step up in support of these investments in quality early learning that prepare children to join our communities and, ultimately, industries as productive neighbors and citizens.

This guest editorial was authored by members of the Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission, including Denise S. Cesare, president and CEO, Blue Cross of Northeastern Pennsylvania; Peter Danchak, president, Northeast PA, PNC Bank; Chester Harhut, judge, Lackawanna County Court of Common Pleas; and David Hawk, board chairman, Gertrude Hawk Chocolates. Attracting businesses. Growing businesses. Fostering entrepreneurs. There's no magic formula that makes one region more attractive for economic development than another. Still, some critical factors must be in place to stimulate business activity and the insatiable quest for the next big thing.

Here in the Greater Susquehanna Valley, we've seen our share of entrepreneurs who took brilliant ideas and nurtured them into thriving businesses, the basis of good, family-sustaining jobs. We've seen businesses adapt with changing times, so those jobs stick around.

We've also seen businesses close their doors, throwing hundreds of people out of work. We've seen businesses consider siting in the region and then settling elsewhere, not satisfied that the requirements for success are in place.

One constant factor weaves through these scenarios. It's the availability of educated, creative people to run the assembly lines, program the computers, answer the phones, sell the products, and contribute new ideas. Businesses want to tap into the energy and work ethic of people who are educated and agile. They take a pass on any region where people lack strong educational foundations and can't adapt to change.

We invest billions in education from kindergarten through 12th grade. Of course, that's appropriate, but the K-12 funding surge is based on the old idea that young children could learn little more than their ABCs and colors.

However, amazing scientific research has opened new windows into the workings of the brain. By age 5, children develop more than 90 percent of the foundation for communications, critical thinking, problem-solving, and teamwork, according to Harvard University. These skills form the foundation for learning and socialization to come.

These amazing transformations don't happen automatically. Brain science tells us that young children need proper stimulation and encouragement to build strong neural connections and social skills.

Studies also show that young children living in poverty are at greatest risk of entering kindergarten not ready to learn. Quality early childhood education can counter the detrimental factors in the lives of at-risk children. Again, the science proves it. The structured, research-based play and interaction offered in a quality early learning center help children overcome the disadvantages of poverty. When they enter school, they are less likely to need remedial education or special help.

Sadly, of 50 children who have trouble reading in first grade, 44 will still have trouble in fourth grade.ⁱ And if they're still reading well below grade level by then, they are much less likely to graduate from high school.ⁱⁱ

Among Columbia, Montour, Northumberland, Snyder, and Union counties, the rates of young children living in economically at-risk families range from a low of 69 percent in Columbia County to a high of 80 percent in Snyder County. That's compared to a state average of 59 percent. Are we supposed to just write off these children?

I would hope not. This is not a political or ideological issue. It's about a community committing to helping every at-risk young child overcome the debilitating effects of poverty and build strong foundations for learning and socialization.

In the blink of an eye, the young children we've helped prepare for learning become the desirable workers sought by new and innovating businesses. This area can continue to foster its entrepreneurial spirit. Maybe the next Weis Markets will soon plant roots in this fertile valley. Maybe a company doesn't close its doors due to the changing economy but pulls together its team and adapts, emerging stronger than ever.

These businesses exist, but they must be assured a steady supply of team-capable, job-ready people. If we invest in children from birth, businesses will come here and stay here. That's the road to prosperity, and it's the path we should all be following.
