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Early learning aids economy: Betsy Bort, Mike Plazony, Nick Scott Jr.

The three of us, all members of Pennsylvania's Early Learning Investment Commission, operate in very different industries. However, we all share a vested interest in making Erie County a great place to live, work, and raise a family.

That is why we are pleased that there is widespread bipartisan support for increased investment in high-quality early childhood education programs in this year's state budget. Both Gov. Tom Wolf and House and Senate Republicans have proposed significant investments in these programs -- \$120 million and \$30 million, respectively.

By age 5, 90 percent of the brain is developed. Decades of research show early learning programs are the key to helping children achieve school readiness, which in turn helps them meet critical educational benchmarks that lead to them graduating from high school, joining the workforce, and becoming an overall productive member of society. Recent data shows that quality early learning programs even help to improve health outcomes as adults.

While children who participate in these programs certainly have better lives because of them, providing adequate access to quality early learning also ensures a stronger, more vibrant economy for the rest of us -- in the long and short term.

Quality early learning yields impressive long-term returns to society -- up to \$17 for every dollar invested -- in the form of increased earnings and income taxes, reduced special education and welfare costs, and the really big savings, reduced crime.

As for immediate economic benefits, according to America's Edge, every \$1 invested in early care and education in Pennsylvania generates an additional \$1.06, for a total of \$2.06 in new spending in the state. In fact, investments in quality early learning generate more new spending for local businesses than investments in eight other major economic sectors, including transportation, construction, wholesale trade, retail trade and manufacturing.

However, Pennsylvania is currently ranked 30th in the country in terms of access to pre-kindergarten programs for 4-year-olds, well behind our neighboring states of West Virginia, Maryland, New York and New Jersey. And close to 65 percent of our young people will stay right here in Pennsylvania and

become part of our future workforce. If we would like to remain economically competitive, Pennsylvania must invest accordingly in quality early learning today.

That's why we are so pleased that the governor and Republican legislators have found common ground on this issue, and we hope they will be able to meet somewhere in the middle of their funding proposals.

Please join us in voicing your support for quality early learning programs to your own state representative and senator, and ask them to make your support known to their caucus leaders.

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