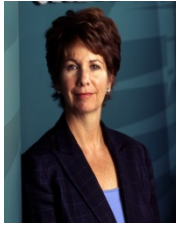


Viewpoint: Pre-K programs would help alleviate poverty in Berks County

By: Julia Klein and John T. Adams



Back in 2011, the United States Census declared Reading, Pennsylvania, as the U.S. city with the largest share of its residents living in poverty. While there seems to have been evidence of some improvement, almost 24 percent of Berks County children are living under 100 percent of the federal poverty level (\$24,250 for a family of four), and 62 percent are considered economically at-risk.

As Chairwoman & CEO of C.H. Briggs Company, and as the District Attorney for Berks County, both of us have large stakes in making Berks County a great place to live, work, and raise a family. One thing we know that would improve our community in the future is investing in high-quality early childhood education today.

That is why in the past few months we have both supported Governor Tom Wolf's proposal to increase public investment in Pennsylvania's Pre-K Counts and Head Start Supplemental Assistance early learning programs. His proposed increase would serve an additional 14,000 children who need these services the most.

Strong research shows that poverty exposes small children to toxic stress, which can irreparably alter their brain development. Approximately 90 percent of the human brain is developed by age five, and one study recently published in *Nature Neuroscience* found that the brain surfaces of children in low-income families were significantly smaller than those of children in higher-income families.

Harvard University reports what we intuitively know: that supportive, responsive relationships with caring adults as early in life as possible – such as those with parents, mentors, or early learning teachers trained in child development – can prevent or reverse the damaging effects of toxic stress.

Teachers in high-quality pre-k programs also interact with parents and help them be better primary caregivers for their children. These factors help at-risk children to grow and develop like their more advantaged peers, giving them a far greater chance at succeeding in school and becoming responsible, tax-paying, and law-abiding citizens, instead of becoming a drain on our public resources by continuing the cycle of poverty.

From the business perspective, 75 million baby boomers will retire by 2018 and only 51 million workers are in line to replace them. And in 20 years, close to 65% of our young people will stay right here in Berks County and become part of the local workforce. Quality pre-k programs will help to ensure our children have skills needed to fill jobs with family-sustaining wages.

In addition to having a more skilled workforce, high-quality pre-k yields safer communities. For example, compared to children who participated in the Chicago Child-Parent Center program,

nonparticipants were 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime by age 18. Furthermore, by age 26, they were 39 percent more likely compared to participants to have spent time in jail or prison.

According to Nobel prize-winning economist James Heckman, the return on investment for high-quality pre-k is ten dollars for every dollar invested. These economic benefits accrue largely to increases in the participants' future wages and reductions in the cost of future crime, as well as decreases in other costs to society such as children being held back in school or receiving special education.

While budget legislation recently passed by the state legislature would increase funding for quality early learning, it would only serve about a quarter of the 14,000 at-risk children that Governor Tom Wolf's proposed increase of \$120 million would serve.

Please join us in asking our state legislators to enact a final budget that gives the rest of these 14,000 children access to these programs now to help put them on paths to more successful futures, as well as help us boost our economy, public safety, and overall health and vitality of Berks County.

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