

# Norm Rich My Turn column: The attraction to early childhood education

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The Greater Susquehanna Valley United Way's Priorities for Impact keep gaining momentum, as citizens tackle our biggest challenges and move our communities forward. I'm especially impressed with the initiatives undertaken by the Early Childhood Education Impact Council that draws people from all walks of life, including business people, early childhood educators, healthcare providers and government officials.

Recently, a project was undertaken by the Early Childhood Education Impact Council named "Every Baby Needs a Laptop." It is a free project and open to parents and their infants (birth to 12 months) in Northumberland, Snyder and Union counties.

Members of the impact council have put together a curriculum in which facilitators and parents join other parents as they together explore how talking, singing and reading to your baby helps them grow, learn and thrive. The idea is to start early, even before preschool, to help children build the ability to learn. After one of the recent sessions, one of the new mothers remarked, "I didn't realize how important the frequency of talking to a baby was for language development. The information was presented well. I was afraid I'd feel super inadequate, but this was a supportive environment."

All are attracted by the message of quality early childhood education, which offers one of the best returns on investment around contributing to a strong, capable workforce. Quality early learning helps children develop the cognitive reasoning abilities and the foundation for learning that will make them desirable employees and good citizens. An increase in pre-kindergarten funding here in Pennsylvania is badly needed, given that more than 100,000 of our eligible 3- and 4-year-olds lack access to high quality pre-K. At the end of the day, the more that we can invest now, the more children can be reached with this once-in-a-lifetime learning opportunity that will only pay huge dividends down the road.

In fact, quality early learning is a solution to a critical dilemma facing employers in the 21st century. Many of the jobs available require skills that only about 20 percent of the current workforce possesses, according to the U.S. Department of Education. In 2013, Manpower Group found that nearly 40 percent of United States employers couldn't find employees qualified to fill many of these openings and they expected the problem to get worse.

We really need to ask ourselves the question, "What kind of future will people have if they lack the needed skills?" At the end of the day, they become dependent, and no one really wants that.

Almost 90 percent of the brain is developed by age 5, laying the groundwork for academic and social success. Quality programs help young children develop core character traits, including stronger focus and self-control, better communication skills, critical thinking and the ability to work in teams or engage in self-directed learning.

Young children who are disadvantaged — those who are at risk of failing school due to adversity — can be 18 months behind their peers developmentally when they enter kindergarten. Despite our very best efforts at remediation, many of those children won't be reading or doing math at grade level by the third grade. And if they are not reading proficiently by the third grade, they won't comprehend much of their school work and in the end are four times more likely to drop out of school. These are the documented facts. This surely is not what we want for our children.

Sadly, here in Pennsylvania, for every six children under 5 years old, only one today has access to high-quality, publicly funded early childhood education. This is criminal and should be unacceptable to all of us. It is time for everyone to step up in support of these quality early learning investments that prepare children to join our communities and be productive neighbors and citizens. We cannot and should not be complacent when it comes to the future of all of our children.

Locally, the Greater Susquehanna Valley United Way is leading the charge in advocating for quality early childhood education. Your gift to the Greater Susquehanna Valley United Way fundraising campaign reinforces the value of early childhood learning and demonstrates that you don't believe in complacency. Your gift might be the most important investment you ever make, as it could be a gift that keeps on giving by helping our children reach their full potential.

-- Norm Rich is the former CEO of Weis Markets, a board member of the Greater Susquehanna Valley United Way and a member of the Early Learning Investment Committee of the Susquehanna River Region.