

Quality early learning programs essential to our region | Opinion



By **Express-Times guest columnist**
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By Timothy S. Fallon

As CEO of **PBS39**, my goal is inform, inspire, entertain and educate the greater Lehigh Valley community.

As a resident of the Lehigh Valley, I am strongly committed to making our region a great place to live, work, and raise a family. By providing respected programming and exceptional educational resources for children and families, we hit two birds with one stone. Through our award-winning and nationally recognized educational programming such as Sesame Street, Peg + Cat, and Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood, PBS39 makes a positive, constructive impact on childhood development. Given that approximately 90 percent of the human brain is developed by age five, this is critically important.

While public television is an invaluable tool with which to reach our children, it is best paired with personal, invested one-on-one interaction. My wholehearted support for the proposal in this year's state budget to increase funding for early learning programs benefiting at-risk children will help broaden educational impact and directly affect the health of our community.

Close to 65 percent of our young people will stay in our community and become part of our future workforce.

The greater Lehigh Valley region has a high level of poverty — approximately 62 percent of children in our area are considered economically at-risk. Strong research shows that poverty exposes young children to toxic stress, which can irreparably alter brain development. In fact, **one study published in Nature Neuroscience** found that the brain surfaces of children in low-income families were significantly smaller than those of children from higher-income families.

Alternatively, **Harvard University reports** what we intuitively know: that supportive, responsive relationships with caring adults early in life — such as those with parents, mentors, and early learning teachers trained in child development — can prevent and even reverse the damaging effects of toxic stress. Teachers in high-quality pre-k programs further advise parents, helping them become better primary caregivers. As a result, at-risk children grow and develop similarly to their better-advantaged peers, giving them a far greater chance at succeeding in school and becoming responsible, productive citizens, thus reversing the cycle of poverty. Studies show that the average return on investment for quality early learning programs is from **\$7 to \$17 for every \$1 dollar invested** — that's an impressive ROI for Pennsylvania's children.

The current proposal will boost access to quality pre-kindergarten for an additional 8,000 children; foster healthy development for 1,900 more infants and toddlers through evidence-based home-visit programs; and allow 2,300 additional children access to child care, allowing parents and care-givers an opportunity to return to work.

Close to 65 percent of our young people will stay in our community and become part of our future workforce. It is in all of our best interests to provide every citizen with high quality, early childhood education.

Please join me in strongly encouraging our state legislators to support this proposed increase for early learning programs and to keep this issue in the forefront of future budgets.

Timothy S. Fallon is the CEO of PBS39. He also serves on Pennsylvania's Early Learning Investment Commission.

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