

Opinion

Harnessing the power of partnerships to improve education

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"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has" — Margaret Mead.

This quote resonates with



and elected officials joining forces to raise awareness

the undertaking of the Berks Early Learning Coalition, or BELC, a small group of business leaders, school administrators

and take action to improve the quality of existing early learning education programs as well as advocating to add high-quality early learning classrooms in Berks County.

The mission of BELC is to promote Berks County business partnerships and community connections that support pre-kindergarten early learning.

When considering children between the ages of 3 and 4 living within the 18 school districts in Berks County, there are about 5,130 students eligible for pre-K programming but not served in any type of quality early learning setting.

To fill the need for these children, it would require more than 265 pre-kindergarten

classrooms. Every child who could be added into a high-quality program would be an investment in the community's future.

BELC is led by co-Chairs Julia H. Klein, chairwoman and chief executive officer of C.H. Briggs; and Alan J. Ottinger, president of Quality Investment Castings Inc. Both are governor appointees of the Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission. Membership includes community leaders from the Berks County Intermediate Unit, local school districts, the Berks Business Education Coalition, Alvernia University, the Berks district attorney's office, the Greater Reading Chamber of Commerce & Industry, Brent-

wood Industries and state Reps. Mark Gillen and Mark Rozzi and Sen. Judy Schwank.

By investing in our youngest children now, when those investments yield the highest societal returns, we can build the workforce we need to keep America competitive in the years ahead. Why? Because, by age 5, more than 85 percent of the foundation for communications, critical thinking, problem-solving and teamwork is developed. These are the base learning skills necessary for the future educational success of our children.

Long-term studies have found that the rate of return on high quality preschool is \$13 for every \$1 invested; that is a better return than the

stock market. Children who participate in quality early care and education programs need fewer supports in school; are more likely to graduate, complete postsecondary education and earn higher wages; and are less likely to pursue unhealthy and illegal behaviors. As business leaders, educators and elected officials, we know of no other investment more worthwhile of our shared commitment. To that end, the BELC Steering Committee has invited Berks business leaders, school district superintendents, elected officials and higher education partners to attend an Early Learning is Good Business Summit at the Berks County Intermediate Unit on April 7

from 7:30 to 10:00 a.m.

Dr. Junlei Li, co-director of the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning, will be the keynote speaker, sharing the return on investment that is reached by the power of human connection for our youngest learners.

Suzann Morris, deputy secretary of the Office of Childhood Development and Early Learning, will provide an overview related to specific Berks data and the perspective from the commonwealth. We are confident that the summit, with the information shared and connections made, will serve as a catalyst for increased investment in early learning across Berks County.