

**OPINION**    SEPTEMBER 2, 2016 6:02 PM

# Helping students find success starts at a young age

BY CHARLENE FRIEDMAN

As we celebrate Labor Day weekend and honor the workforce this year, many hardworking Americans are giving thanks for having jobs in today's sometimes-volatile economy. Indeed, too many are still struggling to find positions in a world where workforce needs have been shifting and where 52 percent of employers have difficulty hiring people with the skills, training or education they're looking for.

In fact, according to a new report from ReadyNation, more than 170,000 positions in Pennsylvania will not be filled with in-state employees possessing the educational credentials their employers seek. Businesses spend about \$188.9 million each year on retraining employees, and about 56 percent of employers expect the recruiting problem to worsen.

Sadly, these figures make sense since 28 percent of students entering the State System of Higher Education have to enroll in remedial courses, costing about \$153 million every year. Looking back further, research shows that two-thirds of eighth-graders are not proficient in math and science — two disciplines in which proficiency has become more critical for thriving in today's STEM-driven economy.

STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) occupations in sectors like health care and computer science have been growing by as much as 20 to 37 percent nationwide. Moreover, STEM jobs are typically higher paying than those in other fields, often commanding salaries more than double the median salary for all workers even though many of these positions do not require four-year college degrees.

So how do we prepare more children to succeed in these fields? Research data shows that children's knowledge of mathematics at preschool age (3 and 4 years old) predicts their later success into elementary, middle and even high school.

Ninety percent of the human brain is developed before age 5, and the first three to five years of life are a unique period of growth for a child's brain. Young children can learn more STEM content than many realize. A quality early learning curriculum that capitalizes on the natural curiosity and exploration of young children quickly develops into an understanding of math and science concepts.

Children can (and should) experience this content through enjoyable, play-based activities appropriate for their age. Programs like Pre-K Counts, Head Start, and Keystone STARS-3 and -4 are based on the Pennsylvania learning standards for early childhood prekindergarten and include topics and content that help lay this foundation for STEM abilities.

Pennsylvania has a long tradition of investing in high-quality early childhood education, but it's not enough. While Pennsylvania's recently enacted state budget for 2016-17 will allow 6,200 additional children to enroll for a full year, about 70 percent of the state's income-eligible 3- and 4-year olds do not have access because of inadequate funding. That's 120,000 young children each year who might lack learning experiences in math and science fundamentals.

Workers and business owners all benefit when our economy is operating on all cylinders. Leaving so many young children without access to high-quality publicly funded pre-K jeopardizes their individual futures and our collective prosperity. It is my hope that by next Labor Day our state policymakers will have acted boldly to serve more of these 120,000 young children.

*Charlene Friedman is the broker of record for Industrial-Commercial Realty LLC, State College Downtown Properties and serves on ReadyNation and Pennsylvania's Early Learning Investment Commission.*



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