



Quality early education is an investment in the future workforce

July 20, 2015 12:00 AM

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As plant general manager of Johnson Matthey Smithfield and as vice president of sales and marketing for Nemaocolin Woodlands Resort, the two of us operate in very different industries. However, we both see ourselves as responsible neighbors with a long-term sustainable view of our respective operations.

Part of this long-term sustainable view is having a strong and suitably qualified workforce, both now and in the form of a talent pipeline for the future.

That is why we are pleased that there is widespread bipartisan support for increased investment in high-quality early childhood education programs in this year's state budget. Both Gov. Tom Wolf and House and Senate Republicans have proposed significant investments in these programs — \$120 million and \$30 million, respectively.

Such an investment would help many additional at-risk children gain access to curricula and services critical for developing into the skilled workers of tomorrow.

Even with states reporting thousands of unemployed residents, jobs remain unfilled across the country due to gaps between the qualities employers need and those that workers possess.

Bloomberg Business says even with almost 13 million Americans looking for work and 8 million more settling for part-time jobs, almost half of 1,300 U.S. employers recently surveyed say they can't find workers to fill positions. In a 2009 survey, 32 percent of manufacturers, a sector which supports an estimated one in six private-sector jobs, reported moderate to serious shortages of qualified workers and 38 percent predicted increased shortages ahead.

As large employers in Western Pennsylvania, we can tell you that many companies in our own region struggle to fill positions.

Employers have started looking for more and more workers with two specific sets of proficiencies: the often-touted science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) skills, as well as executive function skills that prepare employees to work on a team, display leadership, think critically and practice self-discipline.

Executive function skills help workers to better interact with colleagues and clients, become more organized and better prepare to adjust to changing circumstances. In fact, 93 percent of more than 300 employers surveyed agreed that a candidate's demonstrated executive function skills are more important than their undergraduate major.

So, how do we help employers find workers to suit their needs? An important answer lies in quality early childhood education.

Approximately 90 percent of the brain is developed by age 5. Tests measuring different forms of executive function skills indicate that these skills begin to develop shortly after birth, with ages 3 to 5 being a window of opportunity for the most dramatic growth.

Quality early learning programs play a key role in developing executive function skills, as the child has the opportunity to interact with peers and authority figures in an intellectually stimulating environment. Children who attend quality early learning programs are up to 48 percent less likely to be placed in special education and 51 percent less likely to be held back in school. They are also far more likely to graduate high school.

Without a quality early childhood education, not only will many kids struggle in school and fail to graduate, but they will likely make bad life decisions that lead to crime, teen pregnancy and dependence on government programs.

As a result, quality early learning yields impressive long-term returns to society — up to \$17 for every dollar invested — in the form of increased earnings and income taxes, reduced special education and welfare costs, and the really big savings, reduced crime. So while the individuals who participate do have better education, better jobs and better lives, if society makes this kind of investment, it is society that's the big winner.

We are pleased that Gov. Wolf and Republican legislators are able to find common ground on this issue, and we hope they will be able to meet somewhere in the middle.

Since close to 65 percent of our young people will stay right here in Western Pennsylvania and become part of our future workforce, it is in all of our best interests to provide them with a quality early childhood education.

Corbin Kearns of Johnson Matthey Smithfield and Dennis Noonan of Nemaquin Woodlands Resort serve as members of Pennsylvania's Early Learning Investment Commission.