

Early childhood education needs continued support in Pa.

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COMMENTARY

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IN 1962, Michigan school psychologist David Weikart conducted a study that would change the perception of preschool. He wanted to know whether early childhood education affected the school failure rate for socially and economically disadvantaged children.

His study divided 128 high-risk 3- and 4-year-olds into two groups. One group received a high-quality preschool experience and the other didn't attend preschool. Weikart tracked both groups through age 40, and the results surprised even the researchers.

Sixty-five percent of the group who attended preschool graduated from high school compared with 45 percent of those who didn't receive an early childhood education. By age 40, 76 percent of the preschool graduates were employed compared with 62 percent of the other group, and those with an early childhood education had higher incomes and fewer arrests.

Weikart didn't set out to challenge common notions about the origins of success in academics and life. But nearly 50 years later, his landmark experiment to determine the value of high-quality preschool programs still resonates.

Over the years, several studies echoed Weikart's results, but in today's state budget climate funding remains vulnerable for early childhood education programs such as Pre-K Counts and Head Start Supplemental.

Pennsylvania, however, needs to invest in these programs because they're vital to the future success of our children.

In the last school year, fewer than one in five children who entered Pre-K Counts and Head Start Supplemental had age-appropriate language and literacy skills. After a year, roughly seven in 10 children were at the right levels. When our children meet their potentials, we all benefit; but when they don't, we share the costs.

Each dollar invested in early childhood education generates a return of between \$1.80 and \$17.07, according to a 2005 analysis by the Rand Corp. Such returns come in the form of less spending on remedial education, lower crime rates and in the development of healthy, productive, taxpaying adults.

And with so many people set to retire in our region, we need a new generation of productive citizens and an educational system that attracts families to our area to support long-term growth. Across our 13 counties in Northeastern and North Central Pennsylvania, nearly one in four residents is age 60 or older, and in the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre metro area alone almost half of all residents are 45 or older.

At the same time, thousands of local children depend on Pre-K Counts and Head Start Supplemental. During the 2009-10 school year, 2,215 children used the programs in Northeastern Pennsylvania's 13 counties, according to state data. Nearly 900 came from Lackawanna and Luzerne counties.

Given the needs of our region's children, the Blue Ribbon Foundation of Blue Cross of Northeastern Pennsylvania is investing in a healthy future for young children by funding programs providing developmental screenings, medical tests, nutritional support and fitness and safety initiatives.

But helping these children reach their full potentials will require broad support for early childhood health and education programs, especially when the need is so great locally. More than four in 10 children younger than age 5 live beneath the poverty line in Lackawanna and Luzerne counties. And studies have shown the children at greatest risk of falling behind and never catching up are those facing socio-economic challenges.

When Weikart began his research in the early '60s, preschool was a radical concept. Children were thought to be born with a fixed intellectual potential and an inability to learn so young. Today we know that, as one American Public Media report regarding Weikart's research put it, "People are born ready to learn, but what they learn depends a lot on the opportunities they have to learn it."

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