

## Funding preschool programs now will pay dividends later

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### YOUR VIEW



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What comes to mind when you think of a "wise investment in the future"? Would it surprise you that one of the best financial investments a community can make is early childhood education? Pennsylvania's early education programs, such as Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, Keystone STARS, Child Care Works, Early Intervention, Nurse-Family Partnership, Parent-Child Home Program and Head Start, are preparing our young children for school, but more children need access.

The Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis conducted an economic analysis and found that early childhood education provides an outstanding return on investment. Fed Chairman Ben Bernanke states, "Although education and acquisition of skills is a lifelong process, starting early in life is crucial. Recent research has documented the high returns that early childhood programs can pay in terms of subsequent educational attainment and lower rates of social problems." The study found children who received quality early childhood education had higher high school graduation rates and lower prison and welfare dependency rates than children who did not attend these programs.

According to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, what happens in a child's first five years is critical. The human brain is 90 percent developed by age 5. Quality early learning experiences promote healthy brain development so children can build the foundation for language, math and social skills from the start. It is much more effective to provide quality early education than to try and fix problems later.

The benefits to children are substantial and long-term. Research shows that by age 40, low-income children who attended quality preschool had remarkably different lives than those who did not go to preschool. The preschool attendees grew up to earn more money, reach higher levels of education, and pay more taxes than kids who did not attend preschool.

Pennsylvania's early education programs combine research-based standards and accountability to produce terrific outcomes for our young children. In Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, for example, nearly every child (98 percent) ended the 2009-2010 school year with age-appropriate or

emerging age-appropriate skills. By the end of the school year, approximately four times as many children were proficient in language and literacy and mathematical thinking than upon entry. More than 500 children in Lehigh and Northampton counties participated in Pre-K Counts last year.

When a state or community invests in early childhood education, there are immediate benefits: The programs produce economic stimulus by hiring and purchasing goods and services locally, and parents of those young children enter the workforce, have reduced absenteeism and job turnover.

But the real benefits to communities are long-term and hard to beat. High-quality early education, delivered by trained professionals who understand [child development](#), puts children on the road to success. Making sure children get off to the right start is the right thing to do — and it pays back. The Federal Reserve determined there was a 16 percent public rate of return on every dollar spent on the preschool program. Additionally, communities that invest in early childhood education benefit by paying less for remedial education, welfare and prison costs as those preschoolers grow up.

The Manufacturing Institute, based in Washington, D.C., is concerned that only 5 percent of public education dollars go to early childhood education. The institute recommends we fix education problems like we would manufacturing problems — at the earliest source — by reaching children before kindergarten. Only about 36 percent of children under age 5 in Lehigh County and 32 percent in Northampton have access to publicly funded, quality early-education programs even though they are at moderate-high risk of failing in school, based on the state Office of Child Development and Early Learning's Program Reach and Risk Report.

As a member of the Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission, I urge our state and Lehigh Valley community to educate young children. This is an investment in our future. To improve our long-term economic situation, we need to provide early childhood education to low-income young children. Each child represents unique potential — a wealth of original ideas and potential contributions. Early childhood education has a proven track record of helping young children grow up as strong contributors. Join me in making young children our priority. Let's give them a strong start. Let's create a colorful future.

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