

Businesses must provide experience, expertise to help students

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By Edward Donley

American school students are losing ground to the rest of the developed world. We have heard the troubling statistics before — the United States ranks 21st in science and 25th in math scores. Both Republican [President George Bush](#) (No Child Left Behind) and Democratic [President Barack Obama](#) (Race to the Top) have taken on the challenge of reversing the trend of a failing education system in the United States. Change is coming to our education system because our economy depends on it, and it must begin with the youngest children.

Recently, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce published a new report on the importance of investing in early childhood education. Extensive research shows this approach is a very effective strategy to help bridge the long-standing educational achievement gap. This would increase low high school graduation rates and address the impending retirement of millions of baby boomers. These factors would place increasing pressures on American business. Investing in very young children produces huge gains.

While our entire K-12 education system needs drastic reform, we must begin where we can expect the highest return on our investment. Dr. James Heckman, winner of the [Nobel Prize](#) for Economics, has shown that the highest rate of return on dollars spent on human capital occurs at the youngest ages of birth to 5.

Given our economic downturn, it is more important than ever to focus on investments that provide the greatest return. Research on the rates of return to human capital at different ages shows that the earlier the intervention occurs, the greater the payoff.

The skills that our global marketplace demands — literacy, math and social skills such as creativity and leadership — are shaped by age 5. Quality early learning enables the child to do well in school, attend college or job-training programs, and build the skills to get higher-paying jobs and become productive members of society.

A child's environment and their earliest experiences are most influential in the development of a child's [brain](#). Investments in high quality, early learning programs for children yield high returns. Economic research shows that every dollar invested today yields savings up to \$17 in the years ahead.

The state Office of [Child Development](#) and Early Learning shows that children in [Lehigh County](#) are at moderate-high risk of school failure, with children in Allentown at high risk of school failure. Fifty-six percent of Allentown children live in low-income families. Quality early education can help these children to make them more likely to succeed in school and in life.

Business leaders throughout the Lehigh Valley have organized an important forum on early childhood education 7:30-9:30 a.m. Oct. 28 in the Club Suite at [Coca-Cola](#) Park. This important subject will be addressed by Gerald Zahorchak, former secretary for the Pennsylvania Department of Education and current superintendent of the Allentown School District, as well as high-ranking individuals from the business, academic and military communities.

[Pennsylvania](#) cannot let any child fall through the cracks when we have early education programs that can prepare them for success. The first five years represent the most critical time, and our leaders must do more to recognize the importance of focusing on quality early learning. America's competitiveness depends on it.

The business community must become involved. Small and large businesses have the most to gain when we have a well-educated work force. It takes a strong effort at the local level to create innovative models of educational excellence. And it takes leaders willing to take a risk, to make decisions that will change the future for our Lehigh Valley children.

Every part of society has a stake in the future of children. We must be robust partners in their success. To improve our education system, business must lend its experience and expertise — not just money and good will.

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