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YOUR VIEW

Consider next generation, not next election

4:45 PM EDT, June 22, 2011

As we approach the end of June — the end of the state's fiscal year — we are again waiting for the state Legislature and the governor to negotiate and pass next year's budget. Will Pennsylvania invest in early childhood education as it has done recently?

One cannot help but see the upside potential for making this kind of investment. Getting kids ready to learn when they enter school makes financial sense. It reduces the cost of special education in public schools. For example, children who attended Pre-K Counts preschools were far less likely to need high-cost special education when they entered kindergarten than those who did not. Low-income children are especially vulnerable because their parents cannot afford the cost of high-quality, pre-k education.

Too many children in the Lehigh Valley enter kindergarten far behind their peers. But our economically distressed school districts have serious financial problems so the most likely place for them to cut is in programs that are not mandated, such as pre-k and full-day kindergarten.

And yet the best way to save taxpayer money in the long run is to make sure children are well prepared when they get to school. It is quite a dilemma.

Volumes of research have been done on how children's brains develop. From the time they're born until about age 5, children's brains grow at the rate of 700 synapses per second. This is the time of the most rapid brain growth over their lifetime. It's the best time to expose kids to lots of opportunities to learn and develop social skills that will help them in later years. It is also an ideal time to involve parents in the educational process.

By investing in these young children in their early years, we are helping increase the odds that they will graduate from high school and become productive citizens, who pay taxes, instead of delinquents who drain the taxpayers' pockets. There is a well substantiated relationship between the level of education attained and the likelihood of being in the judicial system.

But it is difficult for government leaders to think in terms of 15 to 20 years ahead. Too often our politicians are thinking about the next election instead of the next generation.

Let's think like adults who make wise decisions and invest for long-term gains. Let's make sure that Pennsylvania continues to do the smart thing by investing in young children.

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