

Early education a must for Pennsylvania

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Looking for a good job to support your family? Not so long ago all you needed was a high school diploma, a strong back and dedicated work ethic. Today, that is not the case. Employment opportunities now require increased knowledge of science, technology and engineering as well as competence in those more traditional "soft skills" such as communications, collaboration and critical thinking.

Unfortunately, study after study indicates that American students and workers are falling behind the rest of the world.

U.S. students now rank 21st out of 30 developed nations in science proficiency and 25th in math. Eighty-one percent of high school graduates are deficient in written communications and 70 percent are deficient in the areas of professionalism and critical thinking. Although these deficiencies decrease with a four-year degree, they still are seen by employers in almost 25 percent of young workers.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, 60 percent of new jobs in the 21st century will require skills that only 20 percent of the current American workforce has. This lack of skills is having a significant negative impact on businesses' bottom lines and even threatens our national security.

The reality of our modern-day military is that young people in uniform must operate cutting-edge technology and possess critical thinking skills. So, just as in the civilian workforce, the military increasingly needs better-educated young men and women to run its weapon systems.

It is therefore troubling that the Department of Defense recently reported that 75 percent of Americans ages 17 to 24 are unable to serve in the military because they are physically unfit, lack a high school diploma and/or have a criminal record.

A lack of qualified young people to serve in the military presents an imminent and menacing threat to our national security. As the Army's report "Strong Students, Strong Futures, Strong Nation" says, "In the coming decade, the United States will face a significant workforce shortfall and both the civilian and military sectors may not have the skilled labor required to meet the demands of a knowledge-based economy. The effect on our ability to compete globally will be devastating if we do not act immediately and forcefully to reverse the impact."

Providing quality education is key to reversing this negative trend. Local institutions of higher learning such as Harrisburg University and Harrisburg Area Community College are dedicated to providing our next working generation with increased competence and capacity in these 21st century skills necessary to compete in our global workplace and protect our nation.

But higher education cannot solve this problem alone. For many students, especially those from at-risk families, higher education is far too late, or might not even be a possibility. We must start with our youngest children now through quality early care and education.

Rigorous studies of quality early learning programs confirm that these programs lay the foundation not only for higher achievement in math and reading, but also for the soft skills that remain so critical.

From birth to age 5, children are learning language and numbers, developing creative thinking, problem solving and teamwork skills, and a sense of self. These fundamental skills later translate into higher cognitive ability, academic achievement and social skills that businesses need in their employees and the military requires of its soldiers.

But as important as quality early learning is to increasing children's ability to do the future work of our nation in uniform or as a civilian, we invest the fewest resources in children during their youngest years. Research confirms that 85 percent of a child's core brain structure is formed by age 3, but less than 4 percent of public investment in education and development is dedicated to this period.

Pennsylvania might outrank many states in providing adequate resources for its youngest students through initiatives such as PA Pre-K Counts, state funding for Head Start and other investments in early care and education yet we still only serve about one-third of children that qualify — most of which are classified as at-risk for educational failure — for these publicly funded early learning programs.

Our state lawmakers must continue to invest in the front-end of public education through quality early learning programs that will ensure that more young adults graduate high school and post-secondary educational programs with those 21st century skills that are essential to American businesses and our armed forces.

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