

Invest in early education for best returns

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Op-Ed

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Every day, separated by nearly half a continent, we wake up, get out of bed and embark on the same professional mission: To build a business and create jobs. Constantly confronted by the harsh realities of the corporate balance sheet and often skeptical of government spending, we've come to believe in one key to sustained economic success.

In our view, it isn't capital markets or industrial production or information technology. Instead, it's something that is at once intuitive but somewhat surprising, proven but somehow forgotten: Educating children as early in their lives as we can.

Put simply, early childhood education is one of the best bargains we know. Start with compelling scientific facts that persuaded us. Long before children enter kindergarten at age 5 or 6, 85 percent of their core brain function will have been developed or become permanently impaired. And once the brain function is inhibited, no amount of education can fully rejuvenate it. That's trouble for preschool kids from low-income families, who often lack proper nutrition, health care and adult interaction.

Research tells us that these children are much more likely to score lower in math and reading scores by the fourth grade than their more affluent counterparts, continue to fail in their academic careers and be prime candidates to drop out of high school. The results are young adults who are unprepared to enter the workforce, more likely to become parents too early, abuse substances and become involved in crime.

The Great Recession is simply lighting a match. Pointing to the negative effect of two previous recessions on educational performance (1981-82 and 1990-91), a recent report by The Foundation for Child Development concludes that our present economic situation will do even more damage, reversing three decades of improvement in a series of family and child metrics.

The number of children living in poverty has increased by more than 20 percent in just four years. That's more at-risk kids and that means more cost — in expensive social programs, lagging economic performance and good lives jeopardized — than we can afford.

Enter early childhood education. A recent Urban Institute report echoes the findings of many other studies: Low-income children who attend high-quality preschool programs are 40 percent less likely to be held back a grade, 30 percent more likely to graduate from high school and 100 percent more likely to graduate college.

In Pennsylvania, remarkably, more than 70 percent of at-risk children who attended Pre-K Counts finished the past school year with age-appropriate proficiency in literacy and numeracy. That's an impressive accomplishment. Not only is investing in early learning programs affordable, a recent Pennsylvania study showed that school districts could recoup as much as 78 percent of pre-kindergarten spending in later education savings, including sizable reductions in special education.

Early childhood education investment generates much broader economic impact. According to Cornell University, every dollar Pennsylvania invested in early childhood programs circulates more than \$2 throughout our local economies. And Nobel Prize economist professor James Heckman, factoring several improved outcomes, has proved that early childhood education produces as much as a 10 percent annual return on investment.

We'd take that result in our businesses any day of the week. Yet despite recent progress, less than 20 percent of Pennsylvania's 3- and 4-year-olds have access to publicly funded pre-K. Increasing this investment must be a state and federal priority. A unique opportunity exists in Washington as Congress considers the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

In Harrisburg, this means the governor advancing the commitment he made during the campaign to double the number of children attending high quality pre-kindergarten and other early learning programs during the next four years.

In his inaugural address, Gov. Tom Corbett promised "fiscal discipline" throughout his time in office. Early childhood programs are just that — fiscally disciplined investments that reap huge dividends.

We ask Pennsylvania citizens to follow the actions of our elected officials closely and demand accountability on the promises made in the recent campaigns. Demand that our policymakers act in the spirit of that original Pennsylvania policymaker, entrepreneur and proponent of thrift, Benjamin Franklin. What he said long ago has never been truer than today: "An investment in knowledge always pays the best interest."

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