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Op-Ed: Lee Butz

Investing in early education can improve children's future

Gerald Zahorchak, the dynamic new superintendent of the Allentown School District, has his work cut out for him. Nearly 40 percent of last year's high school seniors failed to earn a diploma on time. He called it "shameful," and it is.

To make matters worse, the earning potential of high-school dropouts is cut by nearly one-third compared to high school graduates, and they are 58 percent more likely to be unemployed.

For most jobs, a high school diploma is no longer sufficient. Sixty-three percent of jobs in the next decade will require some post-secondary education.

You can see the ripple effect — when our children do not succeed in school, they can't fill quality jobs that stimulate the economy, and they earn less and are more likely to require public assistance. And their children are also at increased risk of failing in school because their parents did not graduate from high school.

The situation isn't hopeless. The achievement gap can be closed before it begins through quality early education. All children need quality, early learning opportunities for proper brain development and for building language, math and social skills.

When at-risk children — those living in low-income families and those whose parents have less than a high school education — receive quality early education in the home, child care, Head Start or preschool, they can offset those risks and enter school at grade level. They have a healthy sense of self, can follow directions and work with others, and use their imaginations — all skills that employers demand of their employees.

The window of opportunity to have a real impact closes early. Reading proficiently by the end of third grade is a crucial marker in a child's educational development. From birth through third grade, children are learning to read; after third grade, they read to learn. When children don't read proficiently by third grade, they are more likely to drop out of school. In 2009, nearly 40 percent of third-graders in the Allentown School District scored below proficient in reading on the PSSA tests.

Nobel laureate and nationally recognized economist James Heckman says, "Data from economists, social scientists and medical experts conclusively show that the answer [to best invest in human capital development to increase workforce capabilities] is to invest in comprehensive early childhood development — from birth to age 5 — particularly in disadvantaged children and their families."

Our communities are seeing positive impacts from publicly funded, quality pre-kindergarten programs such as Head Start and Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts. Both programs serve at-risk children who would otherwise likely enter kindergarten below grade level. Community Services for Children, serving approximately 170 at-risk children in Head Start and Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts in Allentown, Easton and Bethlehem, for example, is seeing remarkable results. In 2009-2010, less than 5 percent of children entering these programs in the fall had age-appropriate language, math and social skills. By the end of the school year, more than 90 percent were at grade level.

In Allentown, 83 percent of children under age 5 live in economically at-risk families, making them eligible for one or both of those programs. However, only about 30 percent of Allentown's preschoolers have access to them.

The Lehigh Valley and the commonwealth simply cannot afford to have our children fail. The public costs and strain on the economy are too great. We are fortunate in Pennsylvania to have a quality early education system built on research-based standards for quality and comprehensive accountability that is producing results. We need to take advantage of our strengths and continue to invest in quality early education for a brighter future for our children and our community.

Lee Butz is chairman of Butz Enterprises in Allentown and has served and acted as chairman on numerous community organizations involving the arts, education, health, social services and civic affairs.