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New findings: Quality early childhood closes STEM gap, improves health outcomes

HARRISBURG – New research shows that quality early childhood education remains a smart economic-development investment by nurturing STEM skills for future employers and reducing health care costs in adults, said speakers at an April 9 business summit.

The Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission held its 6th annual Economic Summit on Early Childhood Investment in Harrisburg. The yearly meeting convenes commission members – 76 top business leaders, appointed by the governor to raise awareness of early childhood education – to learn the latest findings in research and policymaking that prove the effectiveness of quality early childhood education as an economic development strategy.

A gap is coming between STEM-trained workers and STEM jobs, which are present in a wide variety of fields, said speaker JD Chesloff, executive director of the Massachusetts Business Roundtable. Quality early childhood education can help close the gap by cultivating young children’s innate, research-proven abilities to learn math and logic, he said.

Curiosity, creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving skills learned in early childhood are the same skills that employers will demand later in life, said Chesloff.

“Young children are natural-born scientists and engineers,” he said. “High-quality early learning environments provide children with a structure from which to build upon their natural inclination to explore, to build, and to question.”

Research shows that adverse experiences in childhood – including abuse, witnessing domestic violence, or household drug and alcohol abuse -- disrupt brain development and create “extreme toxic stress” leading to health consequences in adults, said Sandra P. Alexander, expert consultant for the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The higher the number of adverse experiences, the likelier the adult is to smoke, have cardiovascular disease, abuse alcohol and drugs, and lose time from work, she said.

By contrast, safe, stable, and nurturing relationships “build healthy brain architecture, and that provides a strong foundation for later learning and health,” she said. Strategies and policies to promote better outcomes for children and society should be “informed by the best science of early childhood and brain development,” she said.

“We need to recognize that there really are parallels between the required skills for building healthy children and healthy families, and the skills that lead to better employees, safer communities, and a stronger economy,” Alexander said.

Data shows early childhood development investments help close achievement gaps, which are persistent and costly otherwise, said Rich Neimand, president of Neimand Collaborative, sharing research from Nobel Prize Laureate and economist James Heckman.

Effective investments don't replace family but supplement it, rely on public-private partnerships, invest in the professionalism of early childhood teachers, link to K-12 education, build on data-driven models, remain strong even during downturns, and develop children's health, cognitive and character skills, Neimand said.

"If you want to get rid of inequality, if you want to build a stronger middle class, if you want people to have equal opportunity to achieve, you must address early childhood development, and every child must have an equal chance at effective early child development," said Neimand.

The Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission was created in September 2008 through Executive Order. The purpose of the Commission is to increase business, civic and public awareness of the importance of early childhood education. Approximately 75 business leaders were appointed by the Governor from across the commonwealth to be members of this Commission. For more information and a full summit agenda, visit www.pa-elic.org.