

How pre-K can grow jobs in Erie: Guest Voice of Betsy Bort

Betsy Bort, Contributing Writer
June 29, 2014



As a commercial lender, I work with Erie Bank customers who hope to grow their businesses. Increasingly, though, many say they can't find qualified workers -- the people with the skills and the work ethic to fill their job openings. When their lack of qualified workers prevents them from adding shifts or introducing new products, it hinders the growth of the entire region.

It's a dilemma that demands work toward a solution, and a critical piece of the puzzle, we have come to learn, is high-quality early childhood education. Children who develop cognitive reasoning abilities and the foundation for learning from an early age are much better prepared for the opportunities that lie ahead, and they are ready to fill the jobs our economy offers.

That's why community leaders have rallied around Erie's Future Fund, which grew from the Erie Community Foundation's Early Childhood Advisory Panel in partnership with the United Way of Erie County, Success By 6, local members of the Early Learning Investment Commission and Erie Together. The fund provides scholarships for children from low-income families to attend high-quality early childhood education.

These investments are essential because decades of scientific research prove that the impact of quality early learning experiences resonates for a lifetime. Almost 90 percent of the brain is developed by age 5, laying the groundwork for academic and social success. Quality programs help young children develop the core character traits that will someday make them desirable employees and good citizens, including stronger focus and self-control, better communication skills, critical thinking, and the abilities to work in teams or engage in self-directed learning.

Emerging studies also show that the ability to learn complex S.T.E.M. skills -- the science, technology, engineering and math concepts so critical to workplaces in the 21st century -- is grounded in the quality of prekindergarten learning.

The U.S. Department of Education reports that 60 percent of new jobs in this century will require skills that only 20 percent of the workforce possesses. That's a factor in the skills gap that Erie businesses encounter, and their dilemma isn't unique to this region. Throughout Pennsylvania, more than half of businesses say they struggle to find qualified employees, and they expect the problem to get worse.

Investments in young learners help address this situation because research draws a clear link between high-quality early childhood education and high school graduation, which is an important starting point for job readiness.

The link follows a straightforward path, with three critical points along the way. First, young children who are disadvantaged -- those at risk of failing in school due to adversity -- can be 18 months behind their peers in development by the time they enter kindergarten. Second, despite our best efforts at remediation, many of those children won't be reading or doing math at grade level by third grade. Finally, if they're not reading proficiently by third grade, they won't comprehend much of their school work from then on, and they are four times more likely to drop out of school before graduating.

Quality prekindergarten stops the process before it starts, helping to close the learning gap for at-risk children by the time they enter kindergarten. From there, they're more likely to succeed in school, year after year, and walk the stage on graduation day, ready for college or career studies that prepare them for job success.

In tough economic times, difficult choices must be made by our policymakers. Gov. Tom Corbett's proposed 2014-15 state budget includes increased funding for evidenced-based early childhood programs such as Pre-K Counts, Pennsylvania's highest-quality early childhood education program. The proposed funding reaps strong, measurable dividends in children's academic achievement and their lifetime success. We all benefit, and it's time for everyone to step up in support of these investments in quality early learning that prepare children to join our communities and, ultimately, industries as productive neighbors and citizens.

BETSY BORT, vice president of Erie Bank, has served on the Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission since being appointed by Gov. Ed Rendell in 2010 (www.pa-elic.org).