

## Focus On Our Future celebrates 20th anniversary, remains focus of United Way (column)

By Peter P. Brubaker

Updated: 06/20/2014 01:38:11 PM EDT

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On May 20, a group of early childhood educators, advocates and funders gathered at the York Day Nursery to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Focus on Our Future. Focus on Our Future was initially formed by the York County Community Foundation, Penn State York and the United Way of York County to improve the availability, affordability and quality of early childhood education in York County. It continues to be a strong part of York's United Way program.

The Focus initiative was partly in response to research emerging at that time from Harvard University documenting that 90 percent of a child's brain development occurs before age 5 and that providing children high-quality learning opportunities before kindergarten results in healthier, better-educated and more well-adjusted citizens down the road. Unfortunately at that time, there was only one child care facility in York County accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and Pennsylvania was one of only nine states that failed to provide state funding for pre-kindergarten programs.

Happily, we have made a lot of progress in the last 20 years both locally and at the state level. A significant number of local programs are now accredited either by NAEYC or the state, and Pennsylvania has established programs like Keystone Stars and Pre-K Counts which encourage child care providers to improve the quality of their programs. In addition, Child Care Works, the subsidy program for low-income/working families, has been expanded.

To some extent the success that Focus has enjoyed can be attributed to its ability to engage the business community. This was true throughout the state as business leaders came together to lobby first the Ridge Administration and subsequent administrations to increase state funding. Business leaders care about early childhood education because today's young children are tomorrow's workforce and because there is a tremendous long-term return on investment associated with money spent to improve the quality of pre-kindergarten education. This return is measured in terms of reduced spending on special education, welfare and the criminal justice system.

High-quality programs also help young children develop the core character traits that will make them more desirable employees and better citizens, including stronger focus and self-control, better communication and critical thinking skills, and the ability to work in teams and to engage in self-directed learning.

In 2007, Pennsylvania established Pre-K Counts which helps these children start school on grade level. In tough economic times, difficult choices must be made by our policy makers, but Gov. Corbett's proposed 2014-15 state budget offers Pre-K Counts funding that is reasonable and protects a program that reaps strong, measurable dividends in children's academic achievement and their lifetime success. It is an investment worthy of support.

Peter P. Brubaker is the retired president and CEO of Susquehanna Media Co. in York. He was a founding director of Focus on Our Future.