

# Altoona Mirror

## Quality early childhood education builds the foundation for lifelong learning

Dan Hoover  
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I have been involved with Blair County Head Start for more than 30 years, including the last 12 as chairman. Making sure that at-risk young children get high-quality early learning has become a volunteer job for me. What keeps me attached to this cause?

It's simple. Kids who receive quality early learning will be focused on education throughout their school years. They will gain self-esteem. They will be critical thinkers. They'll know what they want to do with their lives, and they'll be motivated to go after it. They'll develop cognitive reasoning abilities and the foundation for learning from an early age, so they're much better prepared for the opportunities that lie ahead. When the time comes, they will

be ready to fill the jobs our economy offers.

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 even the ability to learn complex STEM skills – the science, technology, engineering and math concepts so critical to workplaces in the 21st century -- is grounded in the quality of prekindergarten learning. Dealing with technology is integral to the success in any job, but even today, more than half of Pennsylvania 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 earn their high school diplomas, ready for college or career studies that prepare them for job success. They'll be welcomed at

businesses throughout the region and statewide, and they'll show up for work with smiles on their faces, knowing that they add value to their workplaces and communities.

Strong regions are built on vibrant neighborhoods and healthy economies, and it all starts with education. In tough economic times, difficult choices must be made by our policy makers. Governor 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.

*Dan Hoover is President/CEO of Roaring Spring Paper Products. He serves as a member of the Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission, [www.pa-elic.org](http://www.pa-elic.org), appointed by Governor Ed Rendell in 2008.*