

Guest Op-Ed: It's time for NEPA to rally around quality early childhood education

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Northeast Pennsylvania is famous for its work ethic and its can-do spirit. By combining forces, we can accomplish anything.

We believe strongly that productive, engaged and educated individuals are the building blocks of a strong community, but today, too many individuals are not reaching their potential. As a result, the region's economic vitality suffers.



How can we recapture the potential of every citizen? Together, we are issuing a call for the NEPA community to unite around a critical piece of the solution - strengthening early childhood education. Other communities have done it, and we certainly can. In Erie, the Lehigh Valley, the Greater Susquehanna Valley, Mercer County, York, and other Pennsylvania communities, diverse partnerships of business leaders, foundations, and community organizations are boosting the quality and availability of early childhood education.



Decades of research substantiate the need for action. Almost 90 percent of the brain is developed by age 5, laying the groundwork for lifetime academic and social success. Scientists have accumulated evidence into the benefits of high-quality early learning and we can now see a direct link between pre-kindergarten experiences and high school graduation rates. Research shows that disadvantaged children who lack high-quality early childhood education can start school up to 18 months behind their peers. If they aren't ready for kindergarten, they are half as likely to read well by third grade. If they're not reading proficiently by third grade, they are four times more likely to drop out of school without graduating.



Newer studies show that young children in high-quality early learning settings are building the capacity to grasp more complex science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) concepts in later years. These skills are needed to fill the STEM-related jobs that increasingly power our economy. 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.

These skills are invaluable to the businesses we represent — Blue Cross of Northeastern Pennsylvania, Gertrude Hawk Chocolates, and PNC Bank. All of our companies benefit from a workforce of people who are well-prepared for opportunities because they developed cognitive reasoning abilities and the foundation for learning from an early age.

Early learning also directly impacts our judicial system, because at-risk children from quality early childhood programs are much less likely to become involved in crime as teens and young adults. In Pre-K Counts, Pennsylvania's highest-quality early childhood education program, the number of children with conduct or self-control problems fell by 80 percent — a critical point, since 60 percent of young children with high levels of disruptive, aggressive behaviors will later show high levels of delinquent and antisocial behavior.

Throughout Pennsylvania, community leaders have developed strategies to enhance the quality and accessibility of early childhood education locally. Sharing research, educating families, providing scholarships and higher-education tuition assistance for early childhood teachers — these are just a few of the initiatives we could replicate in our hometowns. It's time for us to work together to help strengthen early childhood education here in Northeast Pennsylvania.

At the state level, we know that tough economic times require difficult choices to be made by our policy makers. Gov. Corbett's proposed 2014-15 state budget includes increased funding for evidenced-based early childhood programs such as Pre-K Counts. 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.

The foregoing was signed by Denise S. Cesare, Peter Danchak, Chester Harhut, and David Hawk, all of whom serve on the Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission (www.pa-elic.org). Cesare and Danchak were appointed by Gov. Ed Rendell in 2008. Harhut and Hawk were appointed by Gov. Tom Corbett in 2011. Denise S. Cesare is president and CEO of Blue Cross of Northeast Pa. Peter Danchak is president of PNC Bank, Northeastern Pennsylvania. The Hon. Chester Harhut is Judge, Lackawanna County Court of Common Pleas and David Hawk is board chairman, Gertrude Hawk Chocolates. The ideas and opinions expressed are the authors' and not necessarily those of the Business Journal.