

HERALD-Standard

Quality prekindergarten closes learning gaps, prepares children for school and workplace success

Dennis Noonan

Vice President, Sales and Marketing, for Nemaocolin Woodlands Resort

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Here in the Laurel Highlands, the hospitality industry is a major employer. We offer quality jobs for people of all skill ranges and backgrounds, from housekeepers to chefs, and from golf course grounds crew to hotel engineers. The same can be said for our region's shale industry and many other sectors.

Although our industries create jobs, many business leaders worry where our current and future workforce is coming from. Can we find the people with the education and work ethic to fill these jobs and maintain the high levels of service that the region is known for?

Increasingly, business leaders agree that an answer to our workforce dilemma isn't only in the education being delivered in high schools and colleges. It actually starts in prekindergarten classrooms. 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.

Decades of scientific research prove that the impact of quality early learning experiences resonate 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.

We all hope that young children will grow up to contribute their talents and energies to tomorrow's workplaces, 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 just can't comprehend many of their lessons 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 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.