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Quality early education affects current, future jobs

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I support Gov. Corbett's decision to maintain Pennsylvania's investment in quality early education in his budget proposal because Lehigh Valley jobs depend on it. Quality early education facilitates jobs today, which is important. It also prepares our future workforce to fill 21st century jobs, which is critical.

Early education is a job producer. According to a recent report by America's Edge, "Strengthening Pennsylvania Business through Investments in Early Care and Education," for every 10 jobs created in the early education sector, another three jobs are created outside of that sector as early childhood education programs and staff buy local goods and services.

The early care and education sector employs more than 45,000 people in the state, including administrators, teachers and child care workers. With approximately 12,000 young children in publicly funded, quality early education programs such as Keystone STARS, Head Start, PA Pre-K Counts, Early Intervention and Nurse-Family Partnership in Lehigh and Northampton counties, we have hundreds of teachers employed in our local communities to serve them.

Because of quality early education, many parents also are able to continue to work, increase their education and build job skills. In fact, their lifetime earnings could be up to 30 percent higher because they were able to stay in the workforce while their children were young.

Timothy Bartik, senior economist at the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, argues in his recent book, "Investing in Kids: Early Childhood Programs and Local Economic Development," that quality early education programs, like effective economic development programs, increase the per capita earnings of local residents and raise property values. He writes, "The argument is that preschool will increase elementary test scores, and higher elementary test scores have been shown to increase property values. Calculations based on this research suggest that due to elementary test score effects, an expansion of pre-K should result in property value increases of as much as 13 times the annual program costs of the expanded pre-K."

Let's look at what lies ahead for our economy. The Lehigh Valley has seen the job landscape shift, losing significant manufacturing and mining jobs that supported families and didn't require higher education. This trend will only continue; in the next 10 years, a high school graduate with no post-secondary education will be shut out of two of every three jobs. This can be great news if we adequately educate our children so they can earn post-secondary education and qualify for and attract good-paying jobs. If we don't, this could be disastrous for our region. Bartik notes that one of the hardest resources to import is human capital. When nearly two-thirds of adults work in the state in which they were born, our options are to effectively educate our children to fill 21st century jobs or watch those jobs go elsewhere.

In my nearly 50 years with Air Products and Chemicals Inc., first as manager, then president and later as chairman, I recognized early on that the key to our company's growth was recruiting the most skilled employees, and that a good education was essential to building the skills that employers demand. I believe this is more important than ever.

Today's kids need high-level reading, math and social skills to compete for 21st century jobs, and that education begins in early childhood. Pennsylvania's quality early education programs are making the most of a child's early years and getting them on track for school. In 2008-09, about 93 percent of Allentown's preschoolers participated in a publicly funded quality early education program such as Keystone STARS, Head Start, PA Pre-K Counts or Early Intervention. This class that started first grade this fall had a higher readiness than ever, scoring 10 percentage points higher on reading assessments than the class just two years before.

It is hard in today's world to get our leaders to focus on more than just the immediate impact of our investments, but shortsighted decisions can lead to long-term problems. From now until today's preschoolers graduate from college, 10,000 people will reach retirement age in the United States every day. Will today's preschoolers be ready to fill those many, many shoes? Only if they receive a quality education now.

I encourage our state leaders to maintain Pennsylvania's investment in quality early education so our communities can keep our jobs today and look forward to attracting quality jobs in the future.

Edward Donley is the former chairman of Air Products and Chemicals Inc.

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