

Community must invest in preschool education

<http://www.mcall.com/opinion/mc-corbett-budget-ervin-20110314,0,7053831.story>

It's no secret that Pennsylvania faces a difficult economic environment, and Gov. Corbett's budget reflects this negative economy.

However, we are pleased to see that the governor's 2011-12 budget reflects his campaign promise to support early childhood education. Numerous studies show that investing in children at an early age results in long term savings for taxpayers through lower costs in remedial education, juvenile crime, drug and alcohol abuse, and prison.

This budget provides flat funding for most early childhood programs. Head Start, Pre-K Counts, subsidized child care for working parents, and the Keystone STARS program are all funded at the same level as the current year (which was a 2 percent cut from the original allocation).

But costs continue to go up so we are challenged to identify innovative ways to maintain outstanding results. We cannot and will not sacrifice the high quality of these programs.

In tough times, more families fall into poverty, and more children need a head start on their education. Unfortunately, we will need to consider service reductions.

The 2009 American Communities Survey shows that there are many more children living in poverty in the Lehigh Valley. Parents need jobs, but there are more than 600 children on the waiting list in Lehigh County for subsidized child care. An equal number of children are waiting to get into Head Start and Early Head Start.

Government can't do it all. The community has to recognize the enormous long-term value of investing in early childhood education.

Local business needs to support these programs to ensure a quality workforce for the future. School districts and other nonprofits need to work together to meet the needs of our local children.

We as a community cannot afford to "lose" an entire generation of children because of a bad economy. We can't afford the future costs.

Jane R. Ervin is CEO and president of Community Services for Children in Allentown.