

Panel: Focus on youth for secure nation

Military and business depend on fit, well-educated young people, panel says.



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DALLAS TWP. – Two retired major generals, two lawmakers and a CEO read a book to pre-schoolers Friday at an event to draw attention to a study showing three of four young adults nationwide are unfit to join the military.

Maj. Gen. Joseph F. Perugino, Maj. Gen. Daniel J. O'Neill, both retired, were joined by state Sen. Lisa Baker, state Rep. Karen Boback, and Blue Cross of NEPA President Denise Cesare for the forum at the Back Mountain Head Start Center in St. Paul's Lutheran Church.

The book they read -- about shoes -- fit the forum's theme: Preparing youths to fill the shoes of today's soldiers and military and business leaders.

The group discussed the concerns of Mission: Readiness, a national nonprofit group composed of more than 300 retired generals (including Perugino and O'Neill) and admirals regarding a rising skills gap among American youth and its negative impact on the military and business. Steve Doster, state director for Mission: Readiness noted at the event's panel discussion that [military service](#) is out of reach for the vast majority of young adults in Pennsylvania and across the country, according to a new report released by the group Friday.

The report shows 75 percent of young adults nationwide are unable to join up due to [low graduation rates](#) as well as high juvenile crime and obesity rates. It also details how one in five high school graduates in Pennsylvania does not score high enough on military entrance exams to qualify for service.

Workforce needs skills

Also, a recent study found 60 percent of new jobs in the 21st century will require skills that only 20 percent of the current American workforce has.

Lynn Evans-Biga, director of the Luzerne County Head Start Program, joined the panel and discussed how high-quality early education programs establish a student's foundation for learning that later translates into higher cognitive ability, academic achievement and social skills that businesses need in their employees and the military requires of its soldiers.

She also urged the lawmakers to prioritize state funding for early-learning programs such as Pre-K Counts and Head Start, and encouraged them to develop a plan to expand these services to reduce the high unmet need. Perugino, former commander at the 109th Field Artillery, said that "even 30 years ago" it was difficult finding qualified recruits.

"And now the military has become so sophisticated," he said. "If we don't produce qualified soldiers, I could see this being a real threat to our national security 20 to 30 years down the road."

O'Neill noted some soldiers in recent years have been deployed overseas as many as four times. He said the military sometimes offers waivers for recruits who don't meet the physical fitness or educational requirements.

"We need to better prepare our youth so we eliminate the need for waivers," he said.

Cesare said the business arena is also changing. Most firms need employees with higher skill levels, she said, and she urged Baker and Boback to push Harrisburg to invest more in early-educational programs.

Value of early education

Cesare said studies have shown early education, such as Head Start, provides a strong foundation for students. "I've read where Pennsylvania spends \$2.3 billion to incarcerate criminals and just \$209 million on early education," Cesare said.

Biga said Head Start has 1,162 families enrolled and more than 600 on a waiting list because of the lack of funding. She and Boback noted children receive nutritious meals in school and guidance on personal hygiene, but many don't get the same lessons at home.

"We see so many students with bad teeth, for example," Biga said. "What we teach them here is often contradicted at home. You can't eat nutritious food like an apple with bad teeth."

Boback, R-Harveys Lake, a former teacher and guidance counselor, added, "The school system and the home system must be consistent."

Baker, R-Lehman Township, and a member of the [Senate Appropriations Committee](#), said she will look into ways to help fund the early-education programs.

Doster said Mission: Readiness is conducting similar forums across the state and will use the information gathered to continue to urge Gov. Tom Corbett and his administration to provide more funding for early education.

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