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Erie conference focuses on early childhood education

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Early childhood education programs can help the children they serve by better preparing them for school and success later in life.

But they're also an economic tool that can strengthen the entire community.

"Investing in high-quality early childhood education programs not only benefits that individual child, but it has broad spillover benefits for increasing the prosperity of everyone in the local economy," said Timothy J. Bartik, a senior economist for the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research and keynote speaker for the 11th annual Economic Research Institute of Erie conference.

More than 200 business, community and education leaders attended the sold-out conference, "Investing In Kids: Can Early Childhood Education Be an Economic Development Strategy?" at Penn State Behrend's Burke Center on Monday.

Early childhood education programs aren't something that economists usually think about, but they should: Such programs pay off in reduced costs for special education and social services and crime, among other benefits that improve the local economy as a whole, said James Kurre, professor of economics at Behrend and director of the Economic Research Institute of Erie.

"It sets up (children) to be successful, and that helps the community," said Kurre, who organized the conference.

Such programs also increase the participation of parents in the labor force, increasing skills and wages. That improved labor supply attracts more and better jobs, Bartik said. The return on investment is comparable to business tax incentives, he said.

Early childhood education programs also help children develop "soft skills," the social skills necessary to succeed in the workforce and the community, he said.

Nick Scott Jr., vice president of Scott Enterprises and a member of the Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission, spoke about the rapidly changing needs of the workforce, and how early childhood programs can help shrink a skills gap to better prepare today's children for tomorrow's jobs.

"It just makes good business sense" to invest in early childhood programs, Scott said.

Some barriers stand in the way, including cost: half-day universal pre-K for all 4-year-olds would cost $14 billion, Bartik said. And the return on investment is a long-term one.

"The barrier is the fact that we live in a society that is too short-term oriented," he said.

Earlier, audience member Shelly Bentley pointed out another potential barrier. Preschool teachers earn, on average, $18,000 to $20,000 a year, she said.

"Until (preschool teachers) get paid comparable to a public school teacher, we're going to continue to be in this cycle," said Bentley, who owns Reading Now, a diagnostic and instructional reading clinic for youth in kindergarten through 12th grade.

Tom Cholak, general business consultant for Crawford County for Gannon University's Small Business Development Center, said presenters made "a pretty convincing case" for investment in early childhood education.

Now a political leader needs to champion the cause, Cholak said.

"If it was a serious proposal, I think businesses and taxpayers would support it," he said.

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