

Commission: Quality early childhood education pays employment dividends for parents, children

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Pete Danchak, the regional president of PNC Bank for Northeast Pennsylvania, is supporting an educational cause he believes is so powerful it could literally reshape the state's workforce.

Danchak has become a member of Pennsylvania's Early Learning Investment Commission. The group, created by Gov. Ed Rendell, is seeking to both broaden and improve the quality of early child education offered to Pennsylvania's preschool children.

Other members of the commission include representatives from the arenas of nonprofit services, health care, education, retail, and manufacturing. This public-private partnership emphatically states that quality early education can positively impact both economic growth and local earnings.

"We take for granted the basic skills that children learn, but 40 years of research is now available that indicates quality early education helps a child later in school," says Danchak.

According to data received by the commission, access to free or low-cost reliable child care increases the employment rates of parents up to 20 percent. These same parents can also expect long-term earning to increase up to 30 percent over their lifetimes because they were able to consistently remain in the workforce.

Additionally, data shows that quality early education can increase a child's school grades. Their potential earnings as adults may rise up to 60 percent and they will mature into better citizens.

"This all is important for business because they will save dollars in the long term," says Danchak. "Society will experience lower costs for special education, crime, public assistance, and lost tax revenues."

Financial involvement

PNC has been conducting an early education initiative entitled "Grow Up Great" since 2004. The 10-year, \$100 million program is designed to serve early child education in underserved areas and award grants to Head Start development programs to improve areas such as student nutrition, eating habits, sleeping habits, and reading preparation.

"I've spent the last few years visiting child care centers, and I can say that most of the staff members are very committed," says Danchak. "Unfortunately, many children just aren't this lucky."

The recent decline in American manufacturing is an example of a commercial problem that might be helped by renewed workforce skills. Danchak points out that the American society as a whole lags behind many of its Asian counterparts in math and science proficiency, and that 20 percent of American workers cannot read simple sentences or complete basic math problems.

Because today's preschool children will grow into the workers of the future, Danchak says an opportunity exists to begin training kids in the basics of the skills they will eventually need. He admits that early child education, while it produces some immediate results, takes a long time to inject an economic boost back into the community.

"Scientific research clearly shows that when a child attends a quality pre-K program, they will suffer fewer problems later on," says Danchak. "This must be of concern to business owners, because today's pre-K will become the driving force of the economy years from now."

Danchak adds that the commission's efforts have received both Democratic and Republican support. He believes the amount of scientific evidence being uncovered is helping to achieve this unity. For example, he points to brain scans he viewed at Harvard that demonstrate advanced brain development in children due to early childhood learning.

"It's very important to understand that early child education is not looking to replace the parents," says Danchak. "However, birth to age five is when kids are most receptive to this type of learning."

Workforce changes

Diane Halstead, director of business partnerships for the commission, points out that massive workforce changes have occurred since the golden days of post-World War II America. During 1960, a scant 27.6 percent of married mothers worked, and only 56 percent of single, divorced or widowed mothers worked outside the home.

By 2007, the number of working mothers had skyrocketed to 71.4 percent of single mothers, 69.3 percent of married mothers, and 80 percent of other mothers.

"It's obvious that huge numbers of women are in the workforce, and most need out-of-home child care," says Halstead. "Yet, in Pennsylvania, only 36 percent of children are enrolled in quality pre-K settings, and some parents don't even understand the need for pre-K."

Both Danchak and Halstead are concerned about funding for Pennsylvania's budding early child educational efforts because of the state's continued budget crisis. Halstead warns that grant availability involves the establishment of clear priorities, and she invites all state policy makers to look at her data.

"One dollar in pre-K education comes back as \$17 later, and part of the return is lower costs to deal with criminal activity," says Halstead.

Elaine Errico, director of the Success by 6 program offered by the United Way of Lackawanna and Wayne Counties, says that the six-year-old initiative strives to ensure that children can experience improvements in the quality, affordability and accessibility of early child development programs. She explains that many children who enter kindergarten are not ready to learn, and that helping these children is the prime objective of Success by 6.

"We work with 950 students throughout seven regional school districts and do not charge for our services, because this is all grant-funded," says Errico. "Each of these districts has similar expectations, and we state helpful guidelines for them to follow."

Setting standards

Success by 6 is working to set a new standard for early child education. This includes proficiencies in rhyming words, counting, basic math, and helping pre-K children to know their address, phone number, and the first and last names of their parents.

Social and emotional development for the children should include the ability to interact with peers and clean up after themselves. Another extremely valuable skill is the use of word resolution versus physical solutions for conflict situations.

One of the most important facets of Success by 6 is the annual creation of specialty booklets for each of the school's incoming kindergarten classes. Using digital pictures about each faculty, school and classroom, the project seeks to ease the child's transition to public school.

"Many political conservatives don't acknowledge this, but the fact is pre-K adjustment problems with crying and anxiety are very common," explains Errico.

She also says that promotion of early child development is a relatively new initiative in the United States. Welfare reform in the 1990s forced many parents to work. For some of these families, a lack of early development centers may mean speech or eyesight problems remain undetected.

"When these children enter kindergarten, they will have lost two vital years of treatment," says Errico. "For others, when they enter a group, they may be unable to cope and be labeled a trouble maker because conflict resolution skills are learned by about age three."

Marie Gray, Ph.D., a psychologist and licensed professional counselor in Dallas, comments that pre-K curricula are now evolving and, as a rule, are much more structured than in the past. She also says that many pre-K children learn the same things that baby boomers learned in kindergarten.

These skills, according to Dr. Gray, include introduction to reading and writing, plus development of soft skills such as social interaction, sharing, and peer development.

"The fact is that some kids are early learners, while others are late bloomers or late learners," says Dr. Gray. "Early education can set them up for success later in life. However, this instruction will have a cost that can be measured in time away from the child's significant care giver."

Tax dollars

Nate Benefield, director of policy research with the Commonwealth Foundation, explains that his organization supports private grants for early child education from organizations such as the United Way. However, Benefield does not want government tax money to be used for pre-K programs, and says that that adding another year of formal school to Pennsylvania's curriculum would not be a good use of tax dollars.

He adds that any program to improve the education of children must allow choice and competition to be present.

"We have argued that there already are an ample number of pre-K programs in the private sector, and K-12 is where the educational money should be spent," says Benefield. "The evidence is not conclusive that pre-K provides children with a lasting edge and, by third grade, any edge gained has been lost as the children mature."