



Mark Moran / The Citizens' Voice Perugino talks during the roundtable discussion. He said he wants to see more money invested in early childhood education because it is essential to the future of national security and workforce development.



Mark Moran / The Citizens' Voice Retired Maj. Gen. Joseph Perugino, third from left, gestures while speaking during a roundtable discussion on early education programs at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Dallas on Friday.

## Report: 3 of 4 adults unqualified for military

BY DENISE ALLABAUGH (STAFF WRITER)

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DALLAS - Retired Maj. Gens. Joseph Perugino and Daniel O'Neill, two former commanders of the Pennsylvania National Guard's 28th Infantry Division, are taking an active role promoting early learning programs for 3- and 4-year-olds.

They want to see more money invested in early childhood education, they said, because it is essential to the future of national security and workforce development. Not having enough money for early learning programs has the potential to be a threat to national security in the future, Perugino said.

Perugino and O'Neill were among the speakers at a roundtable discussion about the importance of early learning programs Friday at the Back Mountain Head Start Center in St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Dallas. State Sen. Lisa Baker, R-Lehman Township; state Rep. Karen Boback, R-Harveys Lake; Denise Cesare, president and CEO of Blue Cross of Northeastern Pennsylvania and Lynn Evans-Biga, executive director of Luzerne County Head Start, also attended.

Seventy-five percent of young adults nationwide are unable to join the military because they haven't graduated, have criminal records or are obese, according to a report released Friday by Mission: Readiness,

a national security organization of more than 300 retired generals, admirals and other senior military leaders who support investments to help youngsters succeed in school and later in life.

The report details how one in five high school graduates in Pennsylvania does not score high enough on military entrance exams to qualify for service.

"Many of our young adults cannot meet the military's standards in math, reading and problem solving," said O'Neill, a member of Mission: Readiness. "The reality of our modern-day military is that young people in uniform must operate cutting-edge technology and possess critical thinking skills. So, just as in the civilian workforce, the military increasingly needs better-educated young men and women to run its weapons systems."

Cesare expressed the same concerns about a rising skills gap among young people, which she said also has a negative impact on businesses.

"There are individuals entering the business world not fully prepared so they're not qualified to have good jobs. They qualify for lesser-paying jobs," Cesare said. "Sixty percent of new jobs in the 21st century will require skills that only 20 percent of the current American workforce has. This is troubling as businesses recover from the economic recession and look to hire new employees."

Cesare said high-quality early education programs provide a student's foundation for learning before age 5, which leads to higher achievement and social skills that businesses need in their employees and the military requires of its soldiers. She said investing in young people leads to tremendous return on investment and could prevent more costs spent later on incarceration and health issues.

"We're paying so much on the back end for our lack of investment on the front end," Cesare said.

Luzerne County Head Start receives both state and federal funding. With the funding it currently receives, it is able to provide early childhood development, preschool education support and other services for 1,162 children and families while about 600 children are on the waiting list, Evans-Biga said.

"There's a good chance that most of those children will not get in," Evans-Biga said.

"Families really crave and need the support we offer."

Baker said she was pleased restorations were made in the state budget for early learning programs. Pointing out that state officials now will review programs for next year's budget, she said, "We will continue to keep our eyes on these programs. Thank you for what you do for the kids."

dallabaugh@citizensvoice.com, 570-821-2115