

Early childhood education is a key ingredient for success of businesses

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Our state policymakers recently strengthened Washington businesses and our economic future when they found funding for the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program. This is a move that should be applauded as having this quality early learning program in our state is a critical component for reversing a widening skills gap that threatens our sustained economic growth.

According to a new report from the business leaders group America's Edge, at the height of the recession and with 300,000 unemployed Washington residents, more than 10,000 jobs went unfilled because employers had difficulties finding qualified applicants. According to the report, in late 2009 and early 2010, one in four hiring Washington companies reported difficulty finding qualified job applicants with the needed skills.

And this gap is expected to widen as more jobs became available – shortages of as much as 46 percent are expected in accounting and bookkeeping occupations and a staggering 79 percent in science and technology fields. The Washington Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board predicts that demand for midskill jobs will exceed supply by 2013.

One of the biggest drivers behind this skills gap is the increased educational requirement for the existing and anticipated occupations. From 2008 through 2018, one in three new jobs nationwide will require at least a bachelor's degree. Here in Washington state, by 2018, 67 percent of all jobs will require postsecondary education, the sixth-highest rate in the country.

This skills gap is harming our state's fragile economic recovery. Not being able to find qualified applicants caused 39 percent of Washington's hiring employers to simply not fill positions; 37 percent were unable to expand their

facilities; 30 percent were unable to develop new products and services; and one in 10 moved some operations out of the state.

If we want Washington to stay a leader in technology and innovation, we certainly need to take a hard look at every level of our education system. But if we really want to create an education infrastructure that will ensure Washington businesses access to a skilled work force, we have to start before that first day of kindergarten.

We have to start at birth.

The America's Edge report points to research which notes that from the day a child is born, the foundations upon which all future learning will be built. Test scores of children in one quality early learning program increased by 52 percent on letter and word identification and their spelling scores increased by 27 percent. And those increasingly important soft skills? Children in a quality early learning program demonstrated greater social-emotional maturity at kindergarten entry, were more attentive, and were less timid. These are the behaviors that will ultimately create a work force of communicators, collaborators and critical thinkers.

Extensive research has also shown that children who attend high-quality early learning programs can be as much as 44 percent more likely to graduate from high school, can be 74 percent more likely to hold a skilled job by age 21, and are 31 percent more likely to hold a job considered semi-skilled or higher. And to address the need for more education – children in one quality program were 2.5 times more likely to be enrolled in a four-year college or university at age 21 than children left out of the program.

Our state policymakers stepped up, and now is the time for Congress to do the same.

Congress is taking up the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act – previously known as No Child Left Behind. Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., has been a champion of early learning and now has an opportunity to influence Washington’s education infrastructure as a key member of the Senate committee that will be drafting the renewal legislation. I support the efforts of Murray in making early learning a priority and urge Congress, through the legislation, to encourage states to shift from a K-12 approach towards a system that incorporates early learning as a crucial foundation.

In a very tough budget year and with difficult choices to make, I applaud our state policymakers for prioritizing ECEAP and even including a modest increase in funding for a program that is so critical to Washington businesses.

I hope our congressional delegation will also seize this opportunity to reverse Washington’s widening skills gap. Our sustained economic security depends on it.

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