

Letter: Key to long-term economic success is start learning early

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While Montana's economy is better off than in many states, our unemployment rate remains well above 7 percent and more than 38,000 of our citizens are actively looking for work.

As a businessman and resident here in Butte, I am especially concerned that many young adults currently looking for work don't have the skills they need to qualify for the jobs that are available.

This skills gap problem is getting a lot of attention nationwide as businesses are finding that many young adults just don't match up for open positions. And it's expected to worsen. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that, between 2008 and 2018, one in three new jobs will require at least a bachelor's degree. In fact, by that time, demand for students in the U.S. with an associate's degree or higher is expected to exceed supply by 3 million workers.

I am a member of the national business leaders group America's Edge. It has released reports detailing the skills gap among young adults, especially in the areas of communication, collaboration, and critical thinking — the "soft skills" that are increasingly important to employers.

All of these worrisome trends raise the questions: How do we restructure our workforce to ensure the best future for our economy? How do we make sure Montana's workers are prepared to compete in a global marketplace?

The answer: Start early.

Studies show that kids who participate in high-quality early learning programs are much more likely to enter the education system with the skills needed to succeed in school and later in the workforce. These programs increase language skills, lower the need for special education and increase graduation rates by as much as 44 percent. What's more, children who attend quality early learning programs are more likely

to be employed and earn more as adults, increasing their spending power and productivity.

A recently released America's Edge report shows that in Montana a total of \$1.61 is generated in sales of local goods and services for every \$1 invested in early child education — comparable to investments in other economic sectors such as construction, transportation and mining, oil and gas.

These investments also have a tremendous rate of return in the long run, as much as \$16 for every \$1 invested, because kids who participate in high-quality programs grow up to become better-educated and more productive workers, with far less remedial education or criminal costs to society.

As our own Sen. Max Baucus and the other members of the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction (dubbed the supercommittee) develop a plan to reduce our long-term debt, I encourage them to recognize programs that offer the biggest bang for the buck.

The supercommittee has a number of options to complete their mandate to reduce the deficit. I urge the supercommittee members to choose approaches that will help ensure America's economic future including support for cost-effective programs, such as high-quality early learning.

In a time of much-needed and long-overdue fiscal austerity, our congressional delegation must make sure every dollar spent is spent wisely. We know one thing that works: Investing in our future economy means investing in early education. It just makes good sense for business.

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