

## Early education touted to reverse skills gap in future work force

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Community leaders see a skills gap among many of their job applicants and believe that shortchanging early education programs will only make the situation worse in the future.

"Providing early childhood education lowers the chance of (a student) being a high school dropout," said Brian Hendrian, market president for Bank of Springfield's Quincy branch.

America's Edge held a news conference at Blessing Hospital today, drawing attention to local preschool education shortfalls.

Tim Carpenter, Illinois director for America's Edge, said 311 Adams County children ages 3 and 4 do not have access to preschool education. Head Start provides education for 360 children in that age group, and 420 are educated in programs supported by the Illinois State Board of Education.

In the past two years, Adams County had a 40 percent reduction in classroom slots available for 3- and 4-year-olds, losing 14 preschool classrooms. According to America's Edge, that reduction wipes out any progress made in the past 10 years for early childhood education.

Local speakers at the news conference said better childhood education leads to better outcomes for students and for the workforce.

"We see increasing demands for more skills, more education and more technical capabilities" in the health care field, said Brad Billings, president and CEO of Blessing Health System.

JoEllen Randall, vice president of human resources at Blessing Health System, said for years the hospital has been constantly seeking skilled workers. She shared statistics about how early educational opportunities improve the chances of success for the students -- even decades later.

"Children who are involved in high quality early childhood education are 74 percent more likely to hold a skilled job by age 21," Randall said.

Those students are 44 percent more likely to graduate from high school and 36 percent more likely to take additional training. Those with the best early education are four times more likely to enter a four-year college or university.

Robert Gervasi, president of [Quincy University](#), said the skills gap is evident as students enter post-secondary education. He said 74 percent of high school seniors are not proficient in math and 60 percent are not proficient in reading.

"Jobs of the future won't be open to candidates who aren't prepared," Gervasi said.

America's Edge reports that six of 10 U.S. jobs in 2018 will require some form of training beyond high school. At this time only four of 10 people are taking extra training.

Billings said Illinois educational achievements have declined in the past 10 years. A decade ago Illinois was ranked 24th in the nation for training in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Now that ranking is 32nd in the nation.

Hendrian said communities and states that invest in education benefit.

"If they have fewer dropouts, they have (a workforce) with more spending power," Hendrian said.

Quincy has exceptional post-secondary educational opportunities, Hendrian said, with [Quincy University](#), John Wood Community College, Blessing-Rieman College of Nursing, Gem City College and Vatterott College among others.