

## **Illinois must invest in children for benefit of future workforce**

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From 2008 to 2018, the number of jobs in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields is anticipated to grow by 20 percent in Illinois. However, the Nation's Report Card found that only 26 percent of Illinois 12th-graders are proficient in math.

As mayor of Collinsville, I am concerned by what such a skills gap means for the economic vitality of our community. We need to better prepare students for their future careers.

According to a new report by America's Edge, 93 percent of Illinois STEM jobs will require postsecondary education by 2018. Illinois ranked 24th in the nation in the percent of bachelor's degrees granted in science and engineering just 10 years ago. Now we have slipped to 32nd. That is not the direction we want to be going if we want to be certain to have a skilled workforce to meet the demands of the market.

How can we reverse this trend? Here's a start: Focus on early care and education.

High-quality early learning improves students' early comprehension of numbers and letters, which are important foundations to later reading and math skills. In one study of a quality preschool program in Oklahoma, letter and word identification were increased as much as 52 percent. James Heckman, a Nobel Prize-winning economist, has determined that early care and education programs lay the foundation for the important "soft" communication skills that too often are lacking in the workforce, that such skills function like building blocks and that early care and education can provide a strong base for later learning.

The Legislature must keep this in mind when crafting the budget. We've already lost a lot of funding for Preschool for All, the public preschool program in Illinois. In the Metro East, we've lost what amounts to 38 full classrooms of preschoolers. And child-care assistance programs for working families are facing a proposed \$85 million cut. If Illinois wants a strong foundation for its future workforce, we should be bolstering early care and education.

*Mayor John Miller • Collinsville*