

CONTRIBUTORS

## Early learning key to later career success

By Peter Gore and John Rohman, Special to the BDN  
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It's graduation season in Maine – a time for great hope and promise. But it is also a good time for reflection. As we celebrate the accomplishments of our graduates, we should ask the question: Are students learning to be learners and thus have the abilities to tackle whatever challenges come their way? We are concerned they are not.

We constantly hear about our current workforce “skills gap” from businesses all across Maine. In fact, many business leaders are more concerned about finding skilled workers than they are about rising health care costs and worker compensation issues. The bottom line? Employers have good paying jobs but can't find skilled workers to fill them. Young Mainers cannot find work because they lack needed skills.

Experts predict that almost 90 percent of all new jobs created in Maine between 2008 and 2018 will require some type of formal education beyond high school. On top of that, a recent Maine skills gap analysis projects 26,000 new high-wage and growth jobs in our state over 10 years.

A lack of skills in our workforce will slow our economic recovery. National data compiled by the business leaders organization America's Edge shows that, because they are more productive, the average lifetime earnings of an individual college graduate are \$2.1 million higher than those of a high school dropout. Here in Maine, our productivity ranks well below the national average. In fact, Maine's value per worker and average earnings ranks 45th nationally.

So how can we best prepare our young people for this unknown and rapidly changing world and better ensure sustainable economic

recovery? Education.

Education is the single most important investment that can be made to ensure successful participation in our new, knowledge-based economy. We need to do it right at every level. Post-secondary education and training are critical to increasing productivity, income and career advancement. But to promote success in college and career, we must start earlier.

Consider these sobering facts in our state: 23 percent of our high school students fail to graduate on time; 61 percent of 8th graders are below grade level in math; and 68 percent of 4th graders read below grade level.

Investing in quality early care and education can have a very large and sustaining impact on our state's economy and businesses. Early experiences, like exposure to language and positive interaction with caring adults, shapes how a brain is built and opens the pathways to all later social, cognitive and emotional learning. Just like building a house, a solid foundation is the first critical step.

Numerous research studies confirm that children who participate in high-quality early learning programs are significantly more likely to enter kindergarten with the skills they need to learn, which leads to successes during school and later in the workforce. Results from the best early learning programs show that participating students have increased language skills, less need for special education and increased graduation rates. Students from such programs are also up to 22 percent more likely to be employed as an adult and can earn as much as 36 percent more than those who did not participate in a high-quality program.

What's more, a long-term study of children who participated in the Chicago Child-Parent Centers found that the program generated nearly \$11 in benefits for every \$1 invested. That's a rate of return that cannot be matched by almost any other public investment.

We applaud our Congressional delegation for their role in providing increased funding in fiscal year 2012 for critical programs like Head Start, Early Head Start and the Child Care and Development Block Grant. We must now protect that funding, even in these tough budget times.

Congress, through the appropriations process for fiscal year 2013, has an opportunity to improve the quality of, and access to, early care and education through funding for these programs. We urge U.S. Sen. Susan Collins, as a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, to do so by maintaining – or even increasing, if possible – funding for these crucial investments, especially to sustain and enhance quality improvements.

High-quality early learning is an imperative building block for moving each and every Mainer along the educational continuum to their highest educational potential and ensuring Maine's businesses have the skilled workforce they need.

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