



Perspectives on helping kids succeed in school and life

By **Doug Stewart**

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As a banker, I pay attention to numbers. These days, I am particularly concerned about the number of future jobs in Illinois that we might have trouble filling.

According to a report from America's Edge, in the next decade, the highest-skilled jobs are expected to grow at more than four times the rate of the lowest-skilled jobs.

Positions in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) are growing particularly fast, and 93 percent of those jobs will require post-secondary education. Yet today, only 41 percent of Illinois adults have an associate's degree or higher.

As we train and re-train our current workforce, we need a long-term strategy to address these increasing education requirements. The solution? High-quality early learning.

By age 3, children from disadvantaged families have vocabularies less than half the size of those of more advantaged peers. That gap only widens as they move into first and second grades. By the time they reach third and fourth grades, they often cannot read or do math at grade level. It is in our interests to make sure such achievement gaps never begin in the first place.

Decades of research confirm that children in high-quality early learning programs are as much as 44 percent more likely to graduate high school. They go on to earn 36 percent more as adults and are as much as 31 percent more likely to hold a job considered semiskilled or higher.

And we will realize significant savings, too. If we provide young learners with quality early education now, we will spend much less on special education, remedial job training, correctional facilities and other outlays that drain economic growth. In fact, for every child served by high-quality preschool, society gains \$15,000 in net economic benefits.

It doesn't take a banker to recognize the magnitude of such a return. Our state has led on this issue over the years. Yet, because of our fiscal troubles, we are now reaching about 22,000 fewer children with state-supported preschool than just a few years ago. In Sangamon, Morgan and Christian counties alone, we've lost 770 of our preschool slots.

To set our children on the right path, we need to build on what we have created and bring high-quality preschool to more children. We have an opportunity to do so through a newly proposed, state-federal partnership that would give Illinois and other states funding to create, strengthen and expand quality preschool for 4-year-olds and provide high-quality child care for children from birth through age 3.

The proposal puts states in the driver's seat when it comes to developing their programs, and it would help us meet the goal of offering quality early learning to every low- and moderate-income 4-year-old in Illinois.

This is an investment in which I, and my company, strongly believe. In fact, recognizing the significant benefits of quality early learning, PNC in 2004 launched Grow Up Great – a \$350 million, multiyear, multilingual initiative for children from birth to age 5.

In Springfield and many central Illinois communities we serve, PNC has provided grants totaling \$540,000 with local partners to reach more than 2,700 preschool children. In addition, our local PNC employees are paid up to 40 hours per year to

volunteer to support these initiatives and help make them a success.

With targeted investments at both the state and federal levels, we can help dismantle the barriers that prevent children from reaching their full potential. When we make it possible for more children to succeed, we will have strengthened the next generation, our economy – and America.

Doug Stewart is regional president of PNC Bank for Central Illinois, headquartered in Peoria and serving the Springfield area. This is the conclusion of a monthly column series – “Jump Start Illinois: Perspectives on Helping Kids Succeed in School and Life” – by different writers.