

Building a Foundation to Reverse North Carolina's Skills Gap



*Guest Column
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North Carolina is facing shortage of workers for future jobs that will require higher educational attainment that experts predict workers in our state will not have.

As a banker, I look at the numbers, and the numbers are not boding well for our state.

According to a report from *America's Edge*, only 38 percent of working-age adults in our state have an associate's degree or higher. However, twice as many new jobs requiring post-secondary education will exist as compared to jobs for those with a high school education or less. And 91 percent of jobs in the fast-growing fields of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) will require post-secondary education by 2018.

Filling these jobs will be difficult when you consider that only 30 percent of the North Carolina Class of 2012 graduates taking the ACT college admissions test met college readiness benchmarks in English, math, reading and science. And 22 percent of our high school students do not graduate on time.

The problems begin well before high school. In North Carolina, 63 percent of eighth graders are below grade level in math; 74 percent are not proficient in science; 66 percent of fourth graders read below grade level. Nationally, 60 percent of three- to five-year-olds lack basic skills, such as counting to ten or recognizing the letters of the alphabet.

In order to reverse these statistics, we must build a foundation for long-term academic and career success. That foundation begins high-quality early learning. Decades of research confirms that, at age 30, children

who had participated in North Carolina's Abecedarian early learning program were four times more likely to have earned a four-year college degree and 42 percent more likely to be consistently employed than those left out of the program.

Studies from high-quality programs in other states have shown that children in the programs were ahead in math and in literacy compared to their peers who did not attend. Participants were also less likely to be held back or need special education and had much higher rates of graduation from high school.

North Carolina has long been a leader in high-quality early care and education, ranking in the top five states for pre-K quality standards. And those quality standards are paying off. A 2012 Duke University study of our state's early learning programs shows that North Carolina third graders have higher standardized reading and math scores and lower special education placements rates in those counties with more funding for those programs. In fact, researchers found that the expected savings in reduced special education and instructional costs for children in these programs is at least equal to the cost of the programs.

Those are numbers that I like.

The state-federal partnership to strengthen early learning programs across the country—now being discussed in Congress—provides a significant opportunity to give North Carolina additional resources to continue improvement of our pre-K and other early learning programs. I urge Congress and the Administration to work together to make this a reality.

Let's continue to be a leader in high-quality early care and education. It's simply good for business.

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