

High-quality early education essential to success

5/28/10 | [1 comment](#)

By John Rohman

It's graduation season in Maine, and my very best wishes go out to each and every new graduate in hopes they have a successful future ahead of them. Yet in the back of my mind, I wonder whether these newly minted graduates are truly prepared to compete and excel in the private sector work force.

About one in five young people in Maine fails to graduate on time or drops out entirely. Even of those who do graduate, many are not ready for the work force because they lack the skills needed to become productive workers, problem solvers, team players, communicators and leaders.

The research shows that many young people entering the work force are not prepared for the job opportunities awaiting them. A report from the business group America's Edge shows that U.S. businesses spend over \$3.7 billion every year for remedial education services for their own employees. Additionally, less than a quarter of employers report that new entrants with four-year college degrees have "excellent" basic knowledge and applied skills, and significant deficiencies exist among entrants at every level.

The deficiencies are greatest with high school graduates: 42 percent of employers report the overall preparation of high school graduates as deficient with the highest levels of deficiency in written communications, professionalism and critical thinking.

In order to build a strong work force for the future, we need to make sure that kids succeed in school and go on to graduate. I believe that investing in high-quality early care and education can help us with this work force readiness issue. To illustrate the point, I'll use an example from my building design profession.

As architects and engineers, every building we design requires a solid foundation on top of which you can develop a sophisticated structure. Educating our children should be done in the exact same way.

Today, we know so much more than we did in the past about the architecture of the brain and how to build a solid foundation for all future learning. The vast

majority of all the brain's foundations are created in the first three to five years of life. Young children need a great deal of interaction with the adults in their lives during these early years to build fundamental skills that later translate into higher brain function and academic skills.

In many ways, the principles are the same I use every day in my work: start with a solid foundation, and then add to each level the details that make each structure unique and valuable. That's why high-quality early childhood education is critical for helping young children become competent students who are more likely to graduate and become productive members of the work force.

This is logical on a common-sense level. But scientific research studies also tell us that children who participate in high-quality early learning do better on a range of outcomes.

Researchers at the University of North Carolina studied children who attended the Abecedarian early education program along with similar kids who did not participate. By age 21, children who did not attend the high-quality early education program were 48 percent more likely to drop out of high school. The kids who attended were significantly more likely to work in a high-skill occupation or pursue higher education. Other studies show similar educational benefits as well as long-term economic benefits of providing at-risk kids with access to high-quality early childhood programs.

Any successful project needs a solid foundation for a durable future. High-quality early education provides a strong introduction to learning that helps kids succeed in school, graduate, and become productive members of the work force.

It's our best bet to make sure Maine's young people can turn their high school diploma into a ticket for a successful career.

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