

Fund early education for a strong future

By Mike Sotelo,

President, Approach Management Services

July 9, 2010

It's graduation season once again; a time of new beginnings for thousands of young adults completing their education across our state. While I wish nothing but the best for every new graduate, in the back of my mind I cannot help but wonder whether they have been instilled with the skills needed to excel and compete in the "real world" workforce.

Nearly 30 percent of young people in Washington State fail to graduate on time or, in some cases, at all. For minority students, these numbers are much more troubling. About half of Washington's Latino and African American students do not graduate high school. Of the students that do graduate, many are sent out into the world without the skills needed to become productive college students and, ultimately, productive, valuable employees and potential leaders.

Research shows that many young people entering the workforce are not fully 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 on remedial education services for their own employees. Additionally, only 24 percent of employers report that new entrants with four-year college degrees have "excellent" basic knowledge and applied skills.

These problems are even greater among high school graduates. Forty-two percent of employers report the overall preparation of high school graduates as deficient, with the highest levels of deficiency in written communication, professionalism and critical thinking.

To build a strong workforce, a successful future and better communities, we need to make sure that our children do not only *graduate*, but graduate with the 21st century skills that businesses need, and with the values that only strong family support can provide. Investing in high quality early education, including pre-kindergarten, will help our children with this readiness issue.

However, it does not just start there- high quality early learning alone can only do so much, a lot of the work has to take root at home. The term *homework* needs to take on a new meaning: more than just studies and grades, it needs to be taken literally to prepare our children to be successful in school and, in turn, successful in life. Building a positive environment at home with a strong familial support system is step number one on our children's road to success.

Both high-quality early childhood education and *homework* are critical in building a solid foundation for helping young children become prepared to enter school ready to excel, increase graduation rates and ensure they're entering the workforce with all of the necessary social and marketable skills.

Researchers at the University of North Carolina studied children who attended the Abecedarian early education program, alongside similar children who did not attend. By age 21, the children that did not attend the early education program were 48 percent more likely to drop out of high school. The children who did attend were significantly more likely to pursue higher education, work in a high-skill occupation and earn more as adults. Other studies, including studies by the National Institute for Literacy, found that children whose parents actively met with teachers, and who read to their children at least 3 times a week were leaps and bounds ahead of other children in their age groups whose parents were less involved.

Congress, through the appropriations process, has an opportunity to improve the quality of early care and education through funding for Early Head Start and the Child Care and Development Block Grant programs. In addition, as it considers reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Congress can help move our educational paradigm to a pre-kindergarten through 12 approach, providing a critical foundation for our future workforce.

The best start is a strong foundation. Family involvement and high-quality early care and education are our best bets to prosperous communities and ensuring our children's diplomas offer them a ticket to a successful life.