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Maine Voices: Early childhood investments pay dividends for Maine's economy

The deficiencies of today's graduates are particularly acute in writing and critical thinking.

By EILEEN SKINNER and GODFREY WOOD

ABOUT THE AUTHORS Eileen Skinner is CEO of Mercy Hospital. Godfrey Wood is president and CEO of the Portland Regional Chamber of Commerce.

PORTLAND - As Maine students go back to school, business leaders like us send them best wishes for success.

At the same time, we are concerned about whether Maine's children are being equipped with the 21st-century skills they will need to succeed at work. Will today's students be prepared to address the significant challenges to Maine's future economic growth?

A national report from the business leader group, America's Edge, shows that only 24 percent of employers consider new employees with four-year college degrees to have "excellent" basic knowledge and applied skills.

The problems are greater with high school graduates, with 42 percent of employers reporting their overall preparation for the workforce as deficient.

The deficiencies are particularly high in the areas of written communication, professionalism and critical thinking.

U.S. businesses spend in excess of \$3.7 billion every year to provide remedial education services to employees. Even more alarming is the \$319 billion lost every year in wages, taxes and productivity caused by too many unskilled workers in this country.

Recently the Maine Development Foundation and the Maine State Chamber of Commerce issued a report -- "Making Maine Work: Critical Investments for the Maine Economy" -- that points out some of our economic development shortfalls.

The weaknesses included the need to build a workforce with higher-education degrees and the skills businesses need to support a thriving Maine economy. The strengths included the state's entrepreneurial spirit and steadfast work ethic.

But the report calls into question our productivity, noting that both Maine's value per worker and average earnings rank 45th nationally.

As pointed out in the report, raising our productivity doesn't mean working "harder." It means working "smarter" by raising performances on several fronts, including investing in ourselves.

We believe such investments should start in the earliest years and continue throughout a child's formative years and formal education.

The basic architecture of the human brain is constructed through an ongoing process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood.

Like the construction of a home, the building begins with laying the foundation, framing the rooms and wiring the electrical system in a predictable sequence.

Early experiences literally shape how the brain gets built and opens the pathways to all social, cognitive and emotional future learning.

A strong foundation in the early years increases the probability of positive outcomes. A weak foundation increases the odds of later difficulties.

Rigorous research demonstrates that children who participate in high-quality early learning programs are significantly more likely to enter school with the underlying skills they will need to succeed in school and later in the workforce.

The best programs increase language skills, lower the need for special education, lower dropout rates and increase graduation rates. Particularly important to businesses, quality early learning programs increase rates of employment -- by as much as 22 percent.

Although 85 percent of a child's core brain structure is formed by age 3, less than 4 percent of public investments on education and development target our

youngest children. From a cost-benefit analysis, this lack of investment is simply bad business.

In the short-term, the America's Edge report found that investing in quality early learning will actually stimulate Maine's economy as much or more than investments in sectors such as transportation, wholesale trade, retail trade, manufacturing and utilities.

From a long-term perspective, high-quality early learning programs can save as much as \$16 for every \$1 invested because children who participate in these programs grow up to become better-educated and more productive workers, with far less remedial education or criminal costs to society.

That is a return on investment that cannot be matched by almost any other public investment.

Prioritizing investment in quality early learning is key to ensuring our young people graduate with the knowledge, skills and abilities critical to our sustained economic growth and security.

- Special to The Press Herald