

Skagit Valley Herald

Childhood education- the earlier the better

September 4, 2010

*By Sue Krienen, Shell Puget Sound Refinery General Manager
Skagit Early Learning Committee*

It is back-to-school season in the Skagit Valley and, as a business leader, I have to ask if our children are being truly prepared to compete and excel in the workforce.

According to the national business leader group, *America's Edge*, research shows that many young people entering the workforce are not prepared for the job opportunities awaiting them.

Only 24 percent 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. U.S. businesses spend over \$3.7 billion every year for remedial education services in math, reading and writing for their own employees.

This lack of skills could cause the U.S. to lose its competitive edge in a global marketplace. The U.S. Department of Education has stated that 60% of all new jobs in the 21st century will

require skills that only 20% of the current workforce has. And the problem is growing. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that, by 2014, 22 of the 30 highest growth industries in the U.S. will require some level of post-high school education.

In order to build a strong workforce for the future, we need to make sure that kids succeed in school and go on to graduate with 21st century skills. I believe that investing in high quality Early Learning is key to improving the workforce readiness of our young people.

Today, we know much more about the "architecture" of the brain and how to build a solid foundation for all future learning. The vast majority of the brain's foundation is created in the first three to five years of life – the foundation on which to build fundamental skills that later translate into higher brain function and academic skills our businesses need their employees to have.

High-quality early education is proven to provide a vital introduction to learning that contributes to this strong foundation and helps kids succeed in school, graduate, and become productive members of the American workforce. According to a long-term study following children who attended Perry Preschool, children enrolled in the program were 44 percent more likely to graduate from high school than similar children who did not participate. The kids who attended were also significantly more likely to work

in a high-skill occupation or pursue higher education. Other studies show similar educational and long-term economic benefits from high-quality early learning programs.

Business and community leaders who belong to the Economic Development Association of Skagit County (EDASC) are committed to assuring that every child arrives at kindergarten ready to succeed in school and in life. The EDASC Foundation Skagit Early Learning Committee is working in partnership with Skagit County's school districts, law enforcement leaders, local governments, legislators and non-profit organizations to develop the resources needed to provide every child voluntary access to a high-quality early learning experience. The first step is assuring that our state maintains its investment in early learning programs so we don't lose any ground. Moving forward, we will need to develop sustainable local funding to expand access beyond what is provided by the state.

We welcome the ideas and participation of everyone in Skagit County who cares about the well-being of our children, communities and economic vitality. Together we can build a strong foundation in our children and our county.

*For more information see
Americas Edge at
www.americasedge.org.*