

## **Murcott: Focus on early-years education**

*Published: November 19, 2010*

*By John Murcott*

The school year is well underway and business leaders across Long Island, including me, ask ourselves if our children's education is developing the 21st century skills our businesses need to address the Island's significant challenges to future economic growth.

As president of an information- and technology-driven company, I fully understand we need an entering work force with well-honed skills, particularly in science, technology and math. I am concerned, however, that we are not fulfilling that need.

The Long Island Forum for Technology did a study last year that found the single most important shortfall to regional economic growth is the lack of skilled workers for our industries. In fact, over 30 percent of Long Island industry respondents stated skilled labor as their biggest problem for growth - a bigger problem than the flight of recent graduates from the Island.

What we are experiencing on Long Island is happening across the country. The United States now ranks 21st out of 30 in science proficiency among developed nations and 25th in math.

American businesses also see deficiencies in the "soft skills" - communications, collaboration and critical thinking. A report from the national business leadership group America's Edge shows that employers report that 81 percent of high school graduates are deficient in written communications and 70 percent are deficient in the areas of professionalism and critical thinking. And

although these deficiencies decrease with a four-year degree, they still are seen by employers in roughly 20 to 25 percent of young workers.

This lack of skills is having a significant negative impact on businesses' and our communities' bottom lines. These deficiencies cost our nation \$3.7 billion every year to provide remedial education and in reduced earning potential.

So how do we create a pipeline of students with 21st century skills? We start with our youngest children through quality early care and education.

Rigorous studies of quality early learning programs confirm these programs lay the foundation not only for higher achievement in math and reading, but also for the soft skills so critical in the business world today. Between the ages of birth to 5, children learn to speak and understand language and develop problem solving abilities, social skills and pre-academic skills. These fundamental skills later translate into higher brain function and academic skills the education system needs its students to have and businesses need their employees to have.

But as important as these years are in children's lives to increase their ability to succeed in the work force, we invest the fewest resources in children during their youngest years. In fact, research confirms that 85 percent of a child's core brain structure is formed by age 3, but less than 4 percent of public investments on education and development have occurred by that time.