Saving early childhood programs is essential — especially during a pandemic | Opinion

By

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**By** **Scott L. Bohn**

It’s clear that in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, state and local governments will be faced with extremely difficult budget challenges. Such essential services as public safety and emergency response must continue. In order to preserve this system all options must be on the table, including additional aid from the federal government.

Another essential service worth saving is quality early childhood programs. Pennsylvania law enforcement has long supported early childhood education investments because of the research showing a dramatic impact on future crime prevention.

Quality early learning programs ensure children are ready to learn, succeed throughout school, and live productive lives free from crime and violence.

The COVID-19 crisis threatens this carefully constructed system. If lost — and early childhood programs could very well be hollowed out in ways that will take years to reconstruct — we lose the precious opportunity to usher another generation of children toward productive futures.

Two factors make early learning especially vulnerable.

First, quality early childhood education requires highly qualified teachers, but even before the pandemic, insufficient pay rates caused high levels of attrition. Now, the task of funding cuts in the short or longer  term could dramatically diminish the number of quality child care and pre-k slots available for working parents.

Even teachers who want to stay in the field will not find available jobs and will be forced to seek work elsewhere. They might never return, further draining the talent pool for years to come.

Second, children do not stop growing up just because their programs go away. Every year of depleted programs creates a population of young children who miss out on the crucial brain-development benefits of quality early childhood education. If our commitment to high-quality early childhood education stumbles, we verge on creating a “lost generation” of children who did not capitalize on this most rapid period of brain development

Over the past decade, Pennsylvania lawmakers have taken unprecedented bipartisan action to grow the availability of high-quality early learning programs.

They unified over the unassailable logic of making high- quality pre-k, childcare, and home visiting services available to thousands mole eligible children and families. Solid research proves that our investments give children the cognitive, social, and physical capabilities needed to grow into law-abiding citizens. Our dollars save much more money by preventing future crime, adding to the base of law-abiding, taxpaying citizens, and ensuring a thriving economy for Pennsylvania.

We cannot afford to retreat from these gains. Here at this tipping point, the consequences of decisions made in the next weeks and months will potentially reverberate for decades. Will we make “savings” by cutting early learning investments, only to watch them erode as costs for special education, social services, and even prisons balloon and compound year after year?

Government, at all levels, must work together to help families and communities weather this storm. This certainly includes preserving essential services critical to public safety today and in the future.

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