

Early-learning investments pay business dividends



Lisa
MARS

How can we produce strong economic results on Long Island right away – as high or higher than investments in construction or transportation – while also building the foundation for a stronger workforce in 20 years?

The answer may surprise you: invest in high-quality early care and education.

A recent report by the business leaders group, America's Edge, shows that investments in high-quality early learning programs in New York provide a significant economic boost to local businesses while also helping create a workforce with the skills Long Island firms will need in the future.

At CA Technologies, we operate a high-quality early learning center at our corporate headquarters in Long Island. We are also proud to have helped experts develop higher standards for New York's prekindergarten programs as part of the QUALITY-starsNY, a new rating system that would set uniform standards for early learning centers across the state.

The America's Edge report offers additional reasons why businesses on Long Island should support these programs. According to the report, every \$1 invested in early care and education in New York generates a total of \$1.86 in sales of local goods and services within the state. This increase is as high or higher than investments in other major sectors, such as the aforementioned con-

struction and transportation sectors, but also retail trade, wholesale trade and manufacturing.

New York's child-care programs already have significant economic clout, employing over 100,000 people and generating more than \$4.7 billion in total economic activity for the state.

Still, with 62 percent of children under the age of 6 in New York having both or their only parent in the workforce, more programs need to be available. Here on Long Island, about half of all preschool-age children do not have access to a regulated early-learning setting.

Just as business leaders demand quality in their products and services, we expect nothing less in the early learning centers in our communities. It isn't enough to expand pre-K to include more children; we also need to ensure our state's early-learning programs are of the highest quality. Fortunately, there are identifiable program "quality components" that improve student performance and help drive the short-term economic boost to New York communities. For example, attracting the most qualified teachers with appropriate compensation and having small class sizes and reduced child-to-teacher ratios would contribute to such an immediate boost.

Then there are the long-term outcomes that early education can produce by helping prepare a future workforce with relevant skills. According to the New York State Department of Education, only 37 percent of our public school students graduate "college and career ready." Experts estimate that, by 2018, 63 percent of all jobs in New York will require postsecondary education. This is a problem, especially for the increas-

ingly technology- and innovation-driven companies here on Long Island.

Quality early-learning programs can help address this issue by laying the foundation upon which both "hard skills" – math, reading and writing – and the "soft skills" – communication, collaboration and critical thinking – are built. And again, the quality of the programs is key to laying these academic foundations. Extensive research has shown that quality components – such as comprehensive and age-appropriate curricula, strong family involvement and screening and referral services – are drivers behind success in school, higher rates of graduation and the abilities to hold a skilled job and earn more as an adult.

New York business leaders recognize that our state legislators face very tough choices. But given the positive and proven impact high-quality early learning has on our businesses and economy, let alone on children, we urge legislators to prioritize and protect investments in our state's early learning programs. Two of our local leaders, Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos and Sen. John Flanagan, the chairman of the Education Committee, can lead that effort and also ensure that these programs are of the highest quality by pressing for the implementation of QUALITYstarsNY initiative across the state.

We must protect quality early-learning programs that give back to our economy and will continue to give back over the long term. It's not just good for our children. It's also good for business.

Mars is vice president of human resources at CA Technologies.