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Early-childhood education: an issue of national security

By RICK NORIEGA

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Early-childhood education is not just an education imperative — it needs to be a national security priority. Let me tell you why.

Seventy-five percent of young Americans are not qualified to join the military, according to the U. S. Department of Defense. The three primary reasons are inadequate education, criminality and physical unfitness.

According to the U.S. Army Accession Command, approximately one out of four young Americans lacks a high school diploma. One in 10 young adults is ineligible due to a criminal conviction, and 27 percent of young Americans cannot enlist because they are too overweight to meet military physical requirements.

I want to focus on the education piece. Though sometimes a high school diploma requirement can be waived, about 30 percent of potential recruits with a high school diploma fail the Armed Forces Qualification Test. The 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, reported that 69 percent of the nation's eighth-graders scored below proficiency level in math, and 70 percent scored below proficiency level in reading. Seventh and eighth grade is about the time that students start dropping out of school or mentally checking out of school.

Couple these facts with the upcoming U.S.

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Census data that will show tremendous growth in the very communities that will be needed to populate our armed forces. The very students we will need in uniform tomorrow are increasingly failing in school today. In the 2008-09 Texas school year, 51 percent of kindergartners were Hispanic and 65.4 percent of pre-kindergartners were Hispanic, foretelling the future population of possible military recruits. At the same time, this group arguably has the highest dropout rate in the state.

A recent report titled "Ready, Willing, and Unable to Serve" by the nonprofit organization Mission: Readiness, Military Leaders for Kids states that "early education is an investment in national security." Improved educational outcomes increase the ability of the military to recruit the warriors we need to ensure America's safety.

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The research behind early education is irrefutable. Thirty years of research has demonstrated that 90 percent of a person's adult brain weight is achieved by age 5. In the Institute of Medicine report "From Neurons to Neighborhoods," brain scans and neuroscience demonstrated that the best time to influence a

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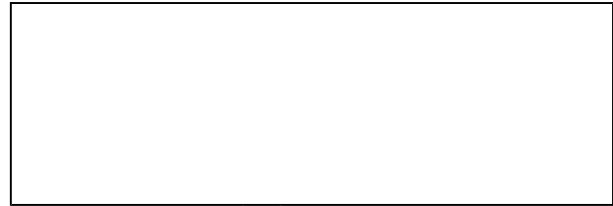
child's intellectual development is when the brain is under most intense development. The most important changes in brain structure and development occur during the first five years.

We at Avance have been doing an intensive parent-child curriculum that addresses this in predominantly Hispanic communities for 37 years — a program that is built on the mother as the first teacher and home as the first classroom.

Our results? In the Dallas Independent School District, we have tracked Avance children to demonstrate that 95 percent of these students graduated from high school. In El Paso our Avance kids have consistently outperformed either the district average or the state average on the third-grade TAKS test.

Nobel laureate economist James Heckman estimates that for every dollar we fail to invest in early-childhood education, it will cost us \$8 in addressing other social needs. He states that "early intervention reduces crime, promotes high school graduation and college attendance, reduces grade repetition and special education costs, and helps prevent teenage births. (It also) raises achievement as measured by test scores." Although the financial consequences to our society are obvious and tangible, this call to action is not about our nation's financial security. This is about investment for our national security.

Most people understand the importance of education in the success of America's economic engines — the need for educated workers, the importance of continued innovation driving our prosperity. I would like to add to that understanding the importance of an educated pool of possible recruits for our military forces and public safety professionals, such as



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firefighters or police. The safety of our future and our nation depends on it.

Noriega is the new national president/CEO of Avance Inc., an early-childhood education program. He is a colonel in the Texas Army National Guard and an appointee to the Military Leadership Diversity Commission.

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