

Early-childhood education is essential

By Jean Bixby Smith and Celia C. Ayala

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With Long Beach and Los Angeles County mired in a stubborn recession, there is no question that these are tough times for many families who are struggling to make ends meet.

Despite the heavy toll of the current recession, there's another major threat to our region's economic well-being that needs to be discussed more widely in the public arena. That danger, which is likely to threaten America's position as the world's preeminent economic power, is our slide in world rankings as it pertains to creating an educated future workforce capable of competing in an increasingly tougher world economy.

The facts are somber, as an alarmingly high number of students are dropping out of high school and college. According to the Institute For a Competitive Workforce (ICW), a nonprofit, nonpartisan affiliate of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the United States ranks 20th out of 28 industrialized countries that are members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in high school graduation rates.

The U.S. also ranks 15th out of 27 OECD countries in college graduation, and ranks second out of 27 countries in the percentage of students (more than 40 percent) who enter college and leave without

earning a degree. That should be of great concern to us locally and nationally, because it is estimated that 90 percent of the fastest-growing jobs in America require some level of post-secondary education.

What is the solution? You may

be surprised, but increasing investment in high-quality early childhood education programs is one strategy that we should embrace more fully, if we wish for our local economy to prosper and remain healthy in future years.

According to its 2010 report entitled, "Why Business Should Support Early Childhood Education," ICW firmly believes that investment in high-quality early learning programs for children from birth to age five yields high returns. In fact, research shows that for every dollar invested today, savings range from \$2.50 to as much as \$17 in the years ahead.

ICW warns that with current early childhood education resource levels, too many kindergartners will continue to begin school

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ill-prepared. Furthermore, language skills and achievement scores in math and reading will likely remain at mediocre levels, the ICW reported. Furthermore, costs for interventions during the K-12 years and after will continue to rise and high school graduation rates and post-secondary degree completion rates will likely remain unchanged. As a result, businesses, including those in Long Beach, risk lacking the necessary workforce to fill the jobs of the future.

Other countries have a better understanding of the value of investing in early childhood education that does America. They know it can have a significant short- and long-term positive impact on children and society, including helping to ensure a future skilled and educated workforce, something the local business community needs.

Sadly, middle-income families in Long Beach and across America are increasingly being squeezed by the cost of high-quality early education. Universal preschool is available in places like Great Britain, Scandinavia and France, but not in the United States. With China investing money to make preschool available more widely as part of a push to develop a highly skilled workforce, the United States continues to fall behind. In fact, America is one of the few highly developed countries that doesn't have close to a universal preschool system in place.

According to ICW, eight states (Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Louisiana, Oklahoma, New York and West Virginia) plus Washington, D.C. have committed to providing a preschool education for all children. We hope that someday California

will also follow suit.

Until then, we urge community and business leaders to familiarize themselves with the benefits of high-quality early learning programs, and convey to policymakers the importance of investing in high-quality preschool education programs in Long Beach and beyond.

Nothing less than our future is at stake.

Jean Bixby Smith is the chairwoman of the Los Angeles Universal Preschool (LAUP) Board of Directors. Celia C. Ayala, Ph.D., is the chief executive officer of LAUP. LAUP funds high-quality preschool programs for more than 10,000 four-year-olds annually in more than 325 preschools across Los Angeles County, including in Long Beach.

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