

Early learning paves future

By Reid Hislop

Published: 12:00 a.m., Thursday, August 19, 2010

As I continue to witness our global competitive advantage decline year after year, and as the school season sets to begin, I have to ask: Is our education system preparing a work force truly ready to compete and excel in a global economy? I am concerned that we are not.

Even in today's economic downturn, companies cannot always fill their open positions because they cannot find individuals with the necessary skills. New York businesses not only see reading, writing and math deficiencies, we also see an inability to collaborate, communicate and think critically.

I recently read that the U.S. Department of Education has stated that 60 percent of all new jobs in the 21st century will require skills that only 20 percent of the current work force has. And I fear the problem is growing. The [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) estimates that, by 2014, 22 of the 30 highest growth industries will require some level of post-high school education.

This lack of skilled workers comes at a high cost. American businesses spend \$3.7 billion every year to provide basic remedial training in math, reading and writing for their employees.

Here in the Capital Region, we need highly skilled individuals for positions opening at high-tech companies, such as [GlobalFoundries](#). We have many talented people in New York but know recruiting from outside of the state to fill these jobs is likely. In this economy, this is an enviable problem to have, but one we must address head-on now.

One of the best ways to address the need for more skilled workers in our region is investment in quality early care and education.

A quality early learning system will be a major incentive to attract skilled employees to our region. Just as communities strive to have a strong K through 12 education system to keep and attract skilled workers and new businesses, quality early learning programs will help us successfully compete for skilled individuals being courted elsewhere, especially those with young children. I know that when my family made the decision to relocate here 41/2 years ago, the quality of the early education system was an important criterion.

Investing in quality early learning will also help us jump start our economy. A report from the national business leader organization, America's Edge, shows that investing in early learning provides an economic boost for local businesses as high or higher than investments in other major sectors such as construction, retail trade, manufacturing, and transportation.

Quality early learning will also ensure we have a future work force with 21st century skills. Research demonstrates that children who participate in these programs are significantly more

likely to enter school with the underlying skills they will need to succeed in school and later in the work force.

These programs increase language skills, lower the need for special education, lower dropout rates and increase graduation rates. Particularly important to businesses, quality early learning programs increase rates of employment -- by as much as 22 percent.

And quality early learning is fiscally sound with a long-term return on investment unmatched by almost any other public investment -- as much as \$16 for every dollar invested.

As our lawmakers struggle with how to make the best use of limited funds, they should prioritize quality early learning. I applaud the state Legislature's decision not to cut funding for New York's pre-K program and hope our new governor and legislators who will be elected in November will continue to recognize the importance of early learning programs that will help us attract and retain a highly skilled work force here in upstate New York.

Reid Hislop is vice president of marketing and investor relations at [Plug Power Inc.](#) in Latham. He is a member of America's Edge, a business organization that advocates for programs that prepare children for the work force of the future.

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