Preschool crucial to students: Paul Clark

Published: Monday, October 24, 2011, 4:00 AM     Updated: Monday, October 24, 2011, 6:59 AM

By

As the Cleveland School District grapples with a $13.2 million shortfall, the school board faces tough decisions in order to balance the budget while maintaining a high standard of education for our local students. Ultimately, the decisions made will impact our entire community, as the preparation of our region’s future leaders and work force is at stake.

Among the possible budget cuts under consideration is the near-elimination of the district’s preschool programming. Unfortunately, the short-term financial benefits of such a decision would be far outweighed by the long-term consequences.

Across Ohio, thousands of children enter kindergarten 18 months behind their classmates in academic skills because their preparation for school is unequal to their peers, particularly those from underserved communities. Educators and school districts continue to work tirelessly to arm students with the knowledge they need for the future, but unless we provide young children with a quality pre-school experience, this community remains at risk of not equipping future generations to address the challenges ahead.

This is especially relevant as we compete in a world economy fueled by an increasingly knowledge-based work force. The foundation for these fundamental skills is set in the early school years. Yet America appears ill-prepared, as more than 20 percent of U.S. workers are unable to read at the most basic level or complete simple addition. Ohio high school graduation rates for incoming freshman are at 79 percent, and at 63 percent for Cleveland, where many low-to-moderate-income families have trouble affording preschool without assistance.
A number of studies have proved the value of quality early childhood education, particularly in savings on special education, remedial job training, correctional facilities and other costs that are a drain on economic growth. The returns on a modest investment in high-quality school readiness initiatives -- estimated at as much as $16 in long-term savings for every $1 spent, according to a cost-benefit analysis of the Perry preschool study -- are significant and long lasting. Children entering kindergarten ready to learn are more likely to graduate from high school and move on to postsecondary education. The benefits of a well-educated work force include higher salaries and greater economic stability. Furthermore, if more students finished school and had a better skill set, we may not have the stubborn unemployment rate that plagues our economy.

We encourage civic, nonprofit and business leaders to join us in supporting quality preschool programming in our region. For our part, PNC Bank continues to collaborate with business leaders in this region and across the state to underscore the importance of quality early childhood programming to underprivileged students, and recently extended "Grow Up Great," our bilingual program in school readiness, by $250 million over 10 years to serve more at-risk students.

In Cleveland alone, PNC has already provided approximately $3 million in grants to local partners to help support programs and initiatives that have reached more than 100 pre-school classrooms and 30,000 students. Additionally, hundreds of area preschool educators have received continuing education that prepares them to engage preschoolers in math, science and the arts, with a particular emphasis on closing learning-readiness gaps among underserved children.

We stand behind the leadership of the Cleveland School District as they work to address the budget challenges ahead, and we encourage them to preserve preschool classes offered through the district. All of our local children deserve access to high quality early education that will prepare them for school, and ultimately to succeed in life.

*Paul Clark (pdf)* is regional president for PNC in Cleveland and co-chairman of Invest in Children.

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