

Michael Vane: National security starts with good quality preschools

Organizations across all sectors of the American economy are constantly on the lookout for the best and brightest young people to join their teams.

Preparing to hire the next generation of leaders entering the workforce doesn't start with a job posting. Research indicates it begins much earlier, during the critical time frame when a child may or may not have access to high-quality early education. And we know that education is a core element of success in our democratic society.

Today, we face a legitimate, undermining threat to the employment engine that drives the American economy. This is clearly defined by the Department of Defense estimate that over 70% of young Americans between the ages of 17 and 24 are unable to serve in the military primarily because they are too poorly educated, have a serious criminal record or are too overweight.

As a retired general and member of the national security nonprofit organization, Mission: Readiness, I view this challenge as a matter of national security. My concern includes not only our military but also all jobs that help promote a healthy America and vibrant economic environment.

Many young Californians lack the basic skills and qualifications to serve in today's military. Currently, more than one in five students do not graduate from high school on time and 24% of those who do graduate and try to join the military do not score high enough on the entrance exam for math, literacy or problem solving to be able to serve.

This challenge extends well beyond the military and to all industries that require similar academic standards for employment.

High-quality early childhood education programs help prepare our youth for success. Rigorous scientific studies have shown that high-quality preschool boosts graduation rates by as much as 44%.

There also is new evidence showing early-learning programs help children develop healthy eating and exercising habits that can contribute to reversing the childhood obesity epidemic that has tripled in one generation.

I offer my sincere gratitude to Gov. Jerry Brown and the California Legislature for working together to include nearly \$273 million for early learning and child development in California's 2014-15 state budget and their promise to provide early learning for all low-income 4-year-olds.

This is the most significant investment in early education in over a decade and is a clear recognition of the importance education plays in the lives of children.

While we have come a long way, there remains much to accomplish in order to improve quality and expand access. According to the California Department of Education, in recent applications for 4,000 new preschool slots, applicants are seeking funding for 32,000 slots — eight times more than currently available.

Therefore, it's critical that the governor and the Legislature follow through with the implementation of the resources required to ensure the promise of a bright future for all of California's youths.

As California's 2015-16 budget takes shape, I would highly encourage a continued strategic focus and investment in high-quality early education. We know that failing to invest in children when they are very young results in a higher cost to society down the road.

High-quality early learning programs cut crime, welfare and other costs such that they return to society more than \$7 for every \$1 invested. Getting in the routine of continuous education early can also help create the life long learning habits necessary for our adult workforce.

At the local, state and federal levels, we have a history of prioritizing investments that will keep Americans employable and our economy vibrant.

In the military, we are constantly focused on securing public interests and protecting our freedoms with some of the most technologically advanced systems in the world.

To make it all work, we need an educated workforce capable of getting the job done, and investing in high-quality early education is critical for attaining that goal.

Personally, it strikes an even deeper chord. Targeting investments for the youngest among us is inextricably linked to preserving the next generation's unalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

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