

Guest Columnist

Workforce development starts at the cradle

R.B. SMITH



Southwest Louisiana is in the midst of a historic economic boom. Billions of dollars of industrial capital investments are adding hundreds of new high skill, high wage, high demand industrial jobs in our regional workforce. This provides millions of dollars infused annually in our economy by these workers.

Those dollars further impact our local economy by creating other jobs that either directly support these industries or induce the overall job growth in the community. The payroll dollars from these indirect and induced jobs go back into our economy creating more opportunities for businesses and jobs.

Sustaining the economy of the region relies upon a pipeline of qualified people to fill the workforce. These people must be equipped with knowledge, skills, and abilities that match the requirements for each job. Years of preparation are dedicated to each person through our K-12 educational system.

For decades, children enrolling in Kindergarten and matriculating through the twelfth grade attaining a high school diploma has marked the first milestone in workforce development.

Unfortunately, some of these children do not thrive in the school environment and drop out of the process along the way. This generally makes adult life more difficult, even overwhelming, when competing without the basic educational requirements essential to obtain most high skill high wage jobs.

Research has revealed that many of those students who drop out of school were not adequately prepared to start Kindergarten. Scientists have documented that 90 percent of human brain development takes place between birth and four years of age. This is the time when a child's brain is wired for success or failure in both school and in life.

In Louisiana, two out of three young children have either both parents, or their single parent in the workforce and over 40 percent of our children start Kindergarten behind their peers.

With more than 10,000 children at risk of receiving little or no early childhood education in preparation for starting school in our region, we have to recognize this critical need and prudently invest in our future.

By investing in early childhood education, we are making three important improvements in our communities. First, our children are prepared for a smart start in life. Second, this creates more opportunities for working families to increase their productivity in the workforce. And third, a better prepared workforce constitutes a strong economic engine for our region.

The Southwest Louisiana Economic Development Alliance supports more funding for early childhood education to serve at risk children. We call on our public and private leaders to work collaboratively and find ways to fund this investment in our future that will have a lifetime impact on our children.

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