



# Build a Better Workforce

Early learning investments lay a crucial foundation for skills development

## Acknowledgements

**Council for a Strong America** is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites five organizations comprised of law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, business executives, pastors, and prominent coaches and athletes who promote solutions that ensure our next generation of Americans will be citizen-ready.

**ReadyNation: Business. Kids. Workforce.**

Business executives building a skilled workforce by promoting solutions that prepare children to succeed in education, work, and life.

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**Only 1/4**  
of Illinois kindergarteners  
demonstrated school  
readiness

### Summary

From the very earliest days of kindergarten, teachers can often tell which children will face the biggest challenges in school. A new Illinois assessment illustrates this point: In fall 2017, only one out of four kindergarteners demonstrated school readiness in all three observed areas: early math, literacy and language, and social-emotional development.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, research also shows that many young children who fall behind early in school will struggle to catch up later—and the remediation measures they need can prove substantial and costly.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, that frustrating reality doesn't necessarily end with school.

Fast forward a number of years: From the very earliest days of a new hire's employment, his or her supervisor can often spot



Skill-building begins very early in a child's life, which is why we need to broaden our approach to workforce development.



**Yvonne Invergo**  
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Lombard Chamber of Commerce

significant deficiencies that lead to workplace challenges. Perhaps a new worker's math skills actually fall well shy of what's really needed for his engineering position or retail sales job. Maybe a new employee's inability to work collaboratively with her colleagues—or even to show up every day on time—presents obstacles to a work team's success.

These issues—both in early childhood and later employment—are not separate matters. On the contrary, they're closely intertwined. Studies show that many of the fundamental skills necessary for workforce

success have their developmental roots during the earliest years of life for children, our future workforce.<sup>3</sup> This is true of both technical and non-technical skills, a subject of increasing focus among both researchers and a growing number of business leaders who value wise, effective workforce-development approaches in an age of increasing global competition. Their conclusion: We should invest further in young children's access to high-quality early learning experiences if we're serious about fielding a well-prepared workforce in the 21st Century.

## Assessing school readiness—and laying a stronger foundation for learning

After several years of pilot efforts, Illinois took its Kindergarten Individual Development Survey (KIDS) statewide in autumn 2017. That's when teachers rated their kindergarten pupils on 14 measures within three developmental areas. The results reflect observations of 81 percent of that year's kindergarten class, and show that far too many youngsters are still entering school unprepared for success. Left unchecked, these shortcomings could spell trouble for them later in school and, eventually, in jobs and careers.

Thankfully, these annual KIDS surveys can aid in shaping and improving early childhood supports, to ensure children are provided with more of the help they need in acquiring a sound foundation for the development of technical and non-technical skills that represent a brighter future.

### The percentage of Illinois children demonstrating school readiness in:

49%



Social and emotional development

44%



Language and literacy

30%



Math

Source: Kindergarten Individual Development Survey (KIDS) for Fall 2017, released by Illinois State Board of Education in August 2018.

## Heightened workforce need for STEM, other technical skills

Some researchers refer to the rapid transformation of our economy and workforce as a “Fourth Industrial Revolution.”<sup>4</sup> Automation, robotics, digitalization, and other major technological shifts are among the prime drivers of this global makeover in business and commerce. These advances are taking place so quickly that it’s difficult for the supporting labor pool to keep up across a wide range of business sectors and around the world. By 2030, it’s estimated that up to half of the planet’s 1.8 billion youth could lack the skills and qualifications needed to participate fully in the ever-changing workforce.<sup>5</sup>

Here at home, such trends have heightened attention on American businesses’ need to develop a pool of well-prepared workers for today and for the future. The past two presidential administrations have designated STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) skills to be a top priority if we wish to remain the global leader in today’s competitive business and commerce landscape.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, over the past decade, our country has seen 34 percent growth in the number of jobs depending upon substantial STEM expertise.<sup>7</sup> Such jobs are not exclusive to the highest-end professions. The National Science Board states: “Though sometimes overlooked, the skilled technical workforce is ... a crucial component of almost every sector of the U.S. economy, ranging from ‘blue collar’ occupations, such as installation, maintenance, and repair, to healthcare and computer occupations.”<sup>8</sup>

Some of the nation’s pre-eminent workforce researchers at Georgetown University note another consequence of rapidly shifting



mechanization. “Because new technology has automated repetitive tasks, workers have been left to focus on non-repetitive tasks, utilizing their new technical capabilities to meet broader goals that are less specialized and involve overlapping areas of responsibility, such as quality or innovation,” they write.<sup>9</sup> Innovation and creativity, in turn, reflect yet another skill set that’s in high demand—arguably, even higher than STEM capabilities and specific, technical know-how.

## No less important to the workforce: social-emotional abilities

Conversations with managers and supervisors consistently reveal non-technical skills to be a major workforce concern, too—skills such as good communication, teamwork, and persistence in tasks. In a national survey of executives conducted in 2017, three out of five business decision-makers said they encountered greater difficulties trying to find job candidates with adequate social-emotional capabilities than in landing workers with solid technical expertise. Moreover, 88 percent of surveyed execs projected an ever-increasing need for such non-technical skills among their employees.<sup>10</sup>

“The employers I know rate ‘soft’ skills—such as teamwork and perseverance—as being at least as critical to workplace success as technical skills.”



**Bill Fleming**  
Executive Director  
Pekin Area Chamber of Commerce

In another poll of more than 500 executives, respondents called “emotional intelligence” a better predictor of employee success than either IQ or previous relevant experience.<sup>11</sup> Plus, according to competency research of over 200 companies and organizations around the world, emotional intelligence could prove twice as important as technical ability in distinguishing the best performers from average workers—and up to four times as significant, in the case of top leadership positions.<sup>12</sup>

“Noncognitive skills form the basis of all learning and are crucial to an individual’s ability to adapt to evolving personal circumstances and workplace demands,” writes an expert with the American Enterprise Institute.<sup>13</sup> “Further, it is precisely these noncognitive skills that, when blended with the high technology that dominates the economy, qualify workers for the fastest-growing, middle-skill, well-paid occupations in fields such as finance, health care, and leisure industries.”

The bottom line: The greatest debate about developing an efficient, effective workforce avoids bogging down in arguments over which is more essential—technical skills or non-technical abilities. Both skill sets are vitally important to the success of our workforce, businesses and economy. Instead, it’s crucial that we focus greater attention on which are the wisest workforce-development strategies for cultivating all these capacities in our current and future employees.



## Early care & ed packs an economic punch, too

Early learning programs are important to strengthening not only our future workforce and economy, but those of today. For example, child care assistance helps parents to find and maintain jobs, knowing their kids have access to affordable, reliable care during work hours. And the lack of such help does the opposite—with harmful fallout for individual parents, their employers’ productivity, and our country’s tax base.

In fact, a new study notes the lack of child care—just considering the parents of infants and toddlers—totals an annual price tag of \$57 billion to the U.S. economy, representing:

**\$37 billion**

**for affected parents (such as lost earnings);**

**\$13 billion**

**for employers (e.g. diminished productivity, employee turnover); and**

**\$7 billion**

**for taxpayers (e.g. lost tax revenues)**

Illinois’ Gross State Product and population represent roughly 4 percent of the nation’s Gross Domestic Product and total population. That suggests that the lack of reliable child care for working parents of young children, up to age 3, could come to **nearly \$2.4 billion in annual costs for Illinois.**

Source: <https://www.strongnation.org/articles/780-want-to-grow-the-economy-fix-the-child-care-crisis>

**“** Research confirms it: A solid grounding in early math helps open the door for development of a wide range of other useful, vital skills.



**Jason Powell**  
Director of Shipping  
Pepsi MidAmerica, Marion

### **High-quality early learning is one effective solution**

Various jobs call for various levels of post-secondary education and training. However, one thing seems clear: The development of skills for any promising position or career largely rests upon a solid foundation for learning—a good beginning. That is what high-quality, early care and education represent, according to a host of research.

Early learning helps to foster growth during kids' first five years of life, when brain development hits the fastest and most transformational pace it will ever realize. During that period, more than 1 million neural connections are forming every second.<sup>14</sup> Early childhood programs that are effective in stimulating that growth and supporting the efforts of parents—who are

kids' first and most important teachers—can make a fundamental difference in the lives of children, and in long-lasting ways.

For example, in the case of technical skill-building, a Canadian study in 2010 centered on the value of ensuring strong early math skills among children by kindergarten age. The quality of those skills “significantly predicted” their second-grade math and reading performance, as well as “general achievement,” it found.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, a University of California researcher has written that “school-entry reading and math skills are almost always statistically significant predictors of later reading and math achievement...[and] rudimentary math skills appear to matter the most.”<sup>16</sup>

When it comes to non-technical skills, the research on the value of early learning is no less convincing. One longitudinal study tracked 800 young children until they reached age 25. It found that, for every one-point increase in their “character skills” scores in kindergarten, the subjects were 54 percent more likely to graduate from high school, twice as likely to earn a college degree, and 46 percent more likely to attain full-time employment.<sup>17</sup>

Other research has targeted the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) that—among other things—put people at greater risk of negative adult outcomes. In Illinois, nearly one out of every 12 young children has encountered two or more ACEs,<sup>18</sup> which range from poverty and parental drug abuse to child abuse and neglect. The negative outcomes of such experiences can vary widely, as well, from health

problems to lower educational attainment, and can significantly depress workforce quality and productivity. Once again, good early childhood programs are among the possible solutions, helping to curb the incidence of ACEs, by providing young children with stable, nurturing environments.

## Strengthening Illinois' early learning efforts

Illinois boasts a solid network of voluntary early childhood programs that can help provide kids with a good start on learning and life. Several steps can help to strengthen such efforts, including these:

- Continue to boost the quality and reach of our **state-supported preschool program**, with the greatest focus on at-risk kids and those from underserved populations. After years of deep cuts, a series of state and federal investments—starting in Illinois FY2016—have gone a long way toward repairing the damage done and extending thousands of typically half-day pre-K slots to a full-day format. Yet tens of thousands of young children still lack the preschool services their parents seek.<sup>19</sup>
- Fully support a vibrant system of **child care assistance** for low-income, working families. Serious eligibility cuts undermined these services beginning in 2015, resulting in a loss of help for nearly 50,000 kids. Illinois has reversed those cuts, but caseloads remain tens of thousands of children shy of their historical levels.<sup>20</sup> The state must



redouble efforts to ensure eligible, working parents know about, and can access, high-quality child care. This program is a critical piece of the early learning system, and helps maintain a stable, productive workforce.

- Grow a series of **“parent-coaching” services** for the families of at-risk infants and toddlers. Illinois has gone years without increasing its state investments in Healthy Families and Parents Too Soon, which reach fewer than one out of 10 kids who could qualify for their help—and were set-back during the stagnation of our recent state budget impasse. These are the kind of home-visiting efforts that produce good outcomes for kids and parents, alike, and merit stronger support now.<sup>21</sup>
- Commit substantial new resources to **early childhood capital projects**. A dearth of appropriate physical space is significantly limiting early learning efforts in communities statewide. A recent survey

revealed the need for more than 200 new pre-K classrooms in schools throughout Illinois—not counting the needs of community-based service providers as well as schools that didn’t participate in the survey.<sup>22</sup> The state’s last program of early childhood construction-and-repair grants was overwhelmed with requests totaling more than a dozen times the resources available—and we should make new resources available now.

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## Conclusion

New survey results illustrate not only large gaps in Illinois kindergartners’ school readiness, but their readiness for success later in life—including jobs and careers. Rather than simply lamenting those challenges, we should recommit ourselves to wise policy and program efforts at meeting them head-on, armed with the lessons of research and experience. We can shape and strengthen workforce skills—technical, and non-technical—by laying a firm foundation for lifelong learning, through better investments in young children’s development. That’s how any common-sense construction project begins: a solid foundation on which to build and work.

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