# Investing in NH's Workforce:

## The Earlier, the Better

BY STEVE ROWE

New Hampshire employers are finding it increasingly difficult to fill jobs in advanced manufacturing, health sciences, software services and information technology, and if left unattended, the problem will only worsen. That's because NH has a rapidly aging population and one of the lowest birthrates in the nation.

Steps are being taken to upgrade high school and college offerings to better align student skills with workplace needs. That's good, but for many it's too late. To truly guarantee an adequate supply of healthy, smart workers, we must make sure that every child arrives at kindergarten prepared to succeed.

Babies are born ready to learn. Early relationships and experiences guide the wiring of the developing brain. Early neural connections occur at warp speed. Learning is faster, easier and more fun than it will ever be again. By age three, certain developmental windows begin to close. By the time a child starts kindergarten, more than 80 percent of structural brain development is complete and the foundation for lifelong health, learning and behavior is largely set. That's why many veteran kindergarten teachers say by the time a child reaches age five, they can predict with considerable accuracy who will complete high school and college—and who won't.

### Most at Risk

Eighteen percent of NH children under age six lived in poverty in 2012 (defined as annual household income of $23,283 or less for a family of four). One in three children lived below 200 percent of the poverty level. Demographic trends suggest a growing percentage of children will be born into low-income families in NH.

These children are likely to hear fewer words spoken in their homes and be read to less frequently than kids with more highly educated and affluent parents. These children are also more likely to be exposed to prolonged stressors that hinder development (frequent moves, crowding, substandard housing, parental depression, inadequate nutrition and exposure to neurotoxins).

In many NH schools, as many as four out of 10 children arrive at kindergarten developmentally unprepared. They lack self-esteem, literacy skills and the ability to think logically or interact well with others. A high percentage will be unable to read at a proficient level in the fourth grade or perform basic math functions in the eighth grade.

Regardless of parental education or income, early exposure to abuse, neglect or violence at home often weakens a young child's brain functioning and suppresses the body's immune system. It's why many kids have difficulty with learning and memory. It's also why they later experience higher rates of smoking and alcohol abuse. And it's why, as adults, they experience higher rates of depression, alcoholism and certain diseases.

### Proven Strategies

Though you wouldn't think it based on NH's meager investment in early education, we know what works for children:

**Home visiting:** Many parents want and need help to better care for and educate their young children. But funding constraints mean less than 5 percent of families receive these services.

**Family literacy:** Many parents want and need help reading in order to read to their children and attain self-sufficiency. But family literacy services are limited.

**Early care and education:** More than 70 percent of young children live in households where all adults work. Yet we have a severe shortage of quality, affordable early childhood education.

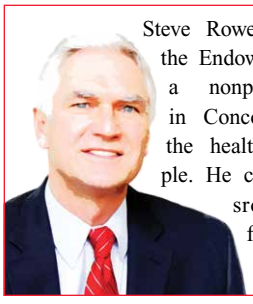
**Public-preschool:** New Hampshire is the only state in New England (and one of 10 nationally) that does not have state funded preschool.

**Quality:** Early childhood teachers arguably have the most important jobs in education. Yet they make about half of what K-12 teachers earn. This affects training, turnover and quality.

### Leadership Needed

Enlightened business leaders understand that investing more in young children will have a two-generation return on investment by improving parents' productivity at work and building a talent pool to drive our economy tomorrow. They also know that investments in early care and education produce a much higher per-dollar return than K-12 schooling, college and later job training.

We need leaders who will actually advocate for early care and education investments. Until we make it a reality for all children, many will start behind and stay behind. They deserve better. So does our economy. ■



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