

Education called good return on investment

By **SANDY SCARMACK**
Herald Staff Writer



CORY BYKNISH | Herald

Dr. Christine Hajek, from UPMC Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh, discusses brain development from birth to age 5 at the United Way of Mercer County's fifth annual economic summit at Hempfield Elementary School, in Greenville.

HEMPFIELD TOWNSHIP – There are mounds of statistics, studies, medical research and financial spreadsheets detailing the benefits of early childhood education, but state Rep. Mark Longietti summed it up by announcing that state officials use third-grade reading scores to figure out how many jail beds they'll need in a few years.

As part of a United Way-sponsored economic summit on early childhood investment, more than a hundred business leaders, school officials and community members gathered Friday morning to listen to experts who reported first-hand what happens when children don't receive the caring and education they need.

Dr. Christine Hajek, a neuropsychologist with UPMC Children's Hospital in Pittsburgh, outlined how critical it is, beginning at birth, to educate and stimulate children. For the first five years of life,

connections in the brain's wiring are developed that eventually lead to what Hajek called "executive functions" that create the ability to problem solve, control impulses and organize thoughts.

The answer to the question of what matters more – nature



UNITED WAY
OF MERCER
COUNTY

vs. nurture – is that both matter equally, she said. "It doesn't determine how smart a child will be. It determines how successful they will be," she said.

"We call it serve and return. A baby makes a noise, babbles, cries and the caregiver responds, with warmth and affection. Most of us do that almost automatically. We hear a baby coo and we start talking baby talk. And that's absolutely critical to the child's development," she said.

The five "R's" that matter

the most in early childhood are reading, rhyming, rou-

"It's easier to build strong children than to repair broken ones."

Dr. Christine Hajek,
neuropsychologist

ties, rewards and relationships, she said. "It's not rocket science, but it's hard for some caregivers."

Studies have shown that children who grow up in poorer homes are less likely to receive that attention, due to a number of factors, and more likely to fail in school, end up in jail and rely on social programs for support.

Often parents are too busy working, facing mounting financial pressure or are themselves facing mental health or drug addiction issues that keep them from connecting

See **EDUCATION**, page A-2

Education

Education called good return on investment

FROM PAGE A-1

with babies and toddlers, Hajek said.

Once those critical development stages are passed, it's nearly impossible to reverse it. "It's easier to build strong children than to repair broken ones," she said.

Mercer County District Attorney Robert G. "Bob" Kochems shared his view of what happens to children who lack appropriate parenting and early childhood education. Among the statistics he shared:

- Children who don't receive pre-kindergarten education are 70 percent more likely to be arrested by age 18.

- High school dropouts are eight times more likely to end up in jail.

- 50 percent of the inmates in Pennsylvania don't have a high school diploma.

"Children aren't born to victimize others. But if they're out of control in the third grade, what do we need to do about that?" he said.

He suggested those early interactions instill a deep sense of right and wrong in a person. "They have to learn to care about other people or it doesn't matter how smart they are. A conscience has to exist," he said.

And key to solving any problem is recognizing one exists, he said. For example, the Grove City area, which he describes as priding itself on being low on crime, has had a streak of heroin overdoses in the last several months.

"They've had one death per 1,000 people. In the Shenango Valley, the death rate is one per 6,600 people and yet that's where everyone assumes the crime is. The problem is in Grove City and it's not recognized," he said.

To solve the problems of a society growing up lacking the necessary interactions and education to

raise a healthy, productive workforce, society leaders need to understand that children are not being raised as they once were.

"The days of Mom being home while Dad worked are gone. We have social problems and we can't ignore it," he said.

Lloyd Lamm, a regional banking executive with First National Bank of Pennsylvania and co-chair of the governor's Early Learning Investment Commission, said he discovered later in life just how critical early childhood education is.

"Why should a banker care about early childhood education? Well, let me tell you why," he said.

"Because of the return on the investment. Because 65 percent of Mercer County youth will stay here and will be that workforce in less than 20 years. In the next 10 years, 76 million baby boomers will retire and there are only 51 million available to fill the gap," he said.

Lamm has taken his newfound passion inter-

nationally, having just returned from Uganda where he pushed the early education agenda. "We operate in a global economy, now more than ever," he said.

Longietti, active in government committees on education, reinforced Lamm's business approach. "Every dollar invested in early education gets a return of \$7 to \$17. Not only is that a great return on investment, but then costs of special education, incarceration and decreased dependence on public assistance all go down."

He also said Pennsylvania lags far behind other areas in the number of children who get pre-kindergarten training. "Some islands in the Caribbean have 100 percent early learning. West Virginia has nearly 85 percent of its 4-year-olds in programs. We have just 25 percent. You only get one chance to be 3 or 4 years old. This is critical," he said.