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## Early education helps region

### Child care and early learning can boost economic development

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NEWPORT NEWS —

The economic health of the Hampton Roads region rests in the hands of infants and toddlers. That was the message shared at an early childhood education summit on Wednesday at Christopher Newport University. The event, organized by the Hampton Roads Chamber of Commerce leadership program, pushed for area businesses to become more involved with preschools and child care programs in addition to school districts.

"Our class believes education, especially early childhood education, will improve the quality of the region's work force," said Geoffrey Pierce, a member of the LEAD Hampton Roads leadership class. "It is a key ingredient for economic development."



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His words were echoed by Robert Leber, Northrop Grumman Shipbuilding director of education and workforce development.

"Early childhood programs are rarely portrayed as economic development initiatives," Leber said. "I believe that's a mistake."

Leber said such programs improve students' lives and prepare them to take full advantage of their educations, helping schools graduate students who are "a thinking workforce."

"Employers would rather have education provide them with trainable employees who can be trained for any job," he said.

Leber and State Secretary of Education Gerard Robinson lauded local early childhood education efforts, including the Smart Beginnings public-private partnership coordinated by the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation, federally supported Head Start programs and local preschool offerings.

Robinson urged the audience to be "champions for children," urging lawmakers to provide more funding and support for quality child care programs and preschool offerings. Robinson said "millions of dollars are lost every year because of child care issues." He also seconded Leber's words that early education

helps students succeed in school and become better workers when they graduate.

"When you talk to lawmakers tell them support has to be strong for public-private partnerships," Robinson said.

The secretary promoted volunteering in preschool or early childhood programs and adopting schools and programs. Such efforts can close achievement gaps between children from low-income and at-risk families and their classmates.

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### **Want to learn more about early childhood education?**

Virginia Preschool Initiative:

[http://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/early\\_childhood/preschool\\_initiative/guidelines.pdf](http://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/early_childhood/preschool_initiative/guidelines.pdf)

Smart Beginnings: <http://www.smartbeginnings.org/>

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