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Retired Military Brass Say Early Education Key To National Security

PA retired generals say early ed will strengthen military by boosting grad rates, cutting crime; urge state lawmakers to prioritize PA Pre-K Counts and Head Start Funding in 09-10 state budget

HARRISBURG, PENN. (June 3, 2009) -- Retired military leaders from across Pennsylvania held a news conference at the State Capitol today, calling for increased investment in early childhood education to improve school success and preserve military readiness for the future.

Retired Major General William Burns, former Deputy Commandant of the US Army War College in Carlisle, PA; as well as major generals Wesley Craig, Dan O'Neill, and Joe Perugino—all former commanders of Pennsylvania's 28th Infantry Division of the Army National Guard—released a new report called "Ready, Willing, and Unable to Serve," which cites new statistics from the Pentagon showing that 75 percent of young people ages 17 to 24 are unable to enlist because they lack a high school diploma, have a criminal background, or are physically unfit, among other reasons.

In Pennsylvania, 1 in 5 high school students fails to finish high school on time or drop out entirely. The graduation rates are even worse in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, where nearly 40 percent to 50 percent of students are not graduating on time, respectively. The retired generals said that investments in early childhood education will increase the number of young Americans who graduate and qualify to serve.

The group highlighted research showing that quality early education programs significantly increase graduation rates and reduce later crime among at-risk children who participate.

"Make no mistake about it—America's men and women in uniform stand ready to keep the country safe. But we need to make sure our recruits in the future are educated, responsible and top-notch. We cannot begin just with basic training: we have to start early," Craig said.

The generals cited a 40-year study of Michigan's Perry Preschool, a groundbreaking early education program. Researchers tracked the progress of at-risk children who participated in the program together with similar children who did not participate.

They found that the at-risk children who attended were 44 percent more likely to complete high school than the children who did not attend. By age 27, the at-risk children who did not benefit from the early learning were five times more likely to be chronic offenders, with five or more arrests.

"We know from the research that investing in early education will help us build a stronger military and a stronger country. With that knowledge, it's our duty to make these early opportunities available to more kids who need them," Burns said.

Pennsylvania's legislative leaders are in the process of negotiating the state's annual budget, including funding for Pre-K Counts and state-funded Head Start, both of which are high-quality early education

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programs that help at-risk kids get ready for school, as well as other quality early childhood investments. O'Neill called on legislators to find room in the budget to continue expanding the reach of these vital programs to more at-risk kids throughout Pennsylvania.

"This issue cuts across party lines and short-term interests. We need to come together and make a long-term commitment to making sure today's generation gets a great start through early education so they are ready to serve our country in or out of uniform," O'Neill said.

Sixty-five percent of Pennsylvania's at-risk children do not have early childhood education due to inadequate funding. Until 2004, Pennsylvania was one of only nine states with essentially no state early education program. By 2008 it had state-funded programs serving 11 percent of four-year olds, and just over five percent of three-year-olds in the state. Pennsylvania serves a far lower percentage of its four-year-olds than its next-door neighbors New York and West Virginia: New York serves 39 percent of its four-year-olds and West Virginia serves 43 percent.

"Our national security 20 years from now is dependent on the investment our country makes in young people today. Pennsylvania leads the nation in our forward thinking, so we would like our legislators to be at the forefront of a program so critical to national security and the success of our children and youth: early childhood education," Perugino said.

On the federal level, the president has proposed a new early learning initiative to help more kids get the right start. The generals also called on Pennsylvania's Congressional delegation to work to fund this proposal and also increase investment in Head Start, Early Head Start, and the Child Care and Development Block Grants.

The retired generals are members of a new organization called Mission: Readiness, which supports policies to help young people get a good start in life so they are prepared for the workforce and for military service, if they choose that path. The event was the first public event held by the organization.

Joining the Pennsylvania generals for the event was Lancaster County resident and Silver Star recipient Specialist Jason Harrington. Harrington served in Ramadi, Iraq with the Pennsylvania National Guard's 28th Infantry from June 2005 to June 2006. He was awarded the Silver Star when he successfully coordinated a rescue of his wounded sergeant, members of his company and of himself after being stranded by an IED attack.

"It is disturbing for me to learn that so many young Americans are ineligible to serve in the military. This is a threat to national security," said Harrington. "Given all the threats that this nation faces around the world – we must do everything possible to invest in the most important component of any military – its fighting men and women."

Amy Dawson Taggart, national director for the organization, said that Pennsylvania has made considerable progress toward providing more at-risk children with early education, but much more remains to be done to reach those most likely to drop out of school.

"We appreciate that Pennsylvania is facing a tight budget and must make tough decisions," Dawson Taggart said. "Strong early learning programs, like Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts and Head Start must be considered core functions of public education that will help prepare young people for a successful life and ultimately qualify them for a career in the military if they so choose. Much depends on the success of future generations of Americans – not the least of which is national security."

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