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## OPINION

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# State must make early education a priority

**By Wm. Polk Carey**

The correlation between education and employment is clear: The better the education, the more likely a person will seek and find employment. The U.S. unemployment rate for those without a high school diploma is 14.3 percent; for those with a bachelor's degree or higher, it is 4.3 percent. This relationship is confirmed in study after study and in country after country.

As the president, Congress and the nation debate the legislative solutions to the disaster that is our unemployment rate, we must emphasize education for its unique ability to deliver systemic and sustained improvement. It's critical that we enact legislation to put the country back on track to jobs and prosperity over the short and medium term. Whatever form the legislation takes, however, we can be certain that much will remain to be done by the states and cities to ensure long-term improvement. The private sector must also step up and do its part.

Lawrence Klein, a Nobel laureate in economics for his work in economic modeling and forecasting, is someone I have long admired and looked to for guidance of economic matters. He once said that the best way to improve a country's economy is by improving the education of the very young.

I remember making ink in my parents' basement and then selling it on the streets

of Baltimore as a very young child of the Depression. That experience taught me all I ever needed to know about the benefits of hard work. Experiences like that, and my early, elementary and secondary education at Calvert School and Gilman School, have guided my career. I may not have appreciated the significance at the time, but these schools and the early influence of a family that has a long tradition of serving the community (notably in the world of education) formed the principles that have guided my career and my life.

Maryland has so often been a leader, as it is today in both education and employment. I don't know of any state that is making better progress than Maryland, with its top ranking in public education, its outstanding universities and private elementary and secondary schools, its relatively low unemployment rates, its high median income and in its election of public officials who make these issues a priority.

Maryland is leading by example — by committing itself to achieving long-term improvements in unemployment through education. The Baltimore Community Foundation and many other fine Maryland organizations are working to end the cycle of illiteracy in high-poverty areas and are especially focused on those at the beginning of their lives.

For all its strengths, the state also has some intractable problems, including an

unemployment rate of 30 percent or more in the poorest neighborhoods for those without a college degree. It is not unrelated that, despite recent gains, one-third of Baltimore children are not ready to enter first grade.

The Johns Hopkins School of Education and other area organizations are to be commended for their efforts to launch a new public-private initiative that matches high-quality child care spots with preschoolers in neighborhoods with the greatest need. I urge government, community and business leaders to get behind this promising program.

Achieving steady improvement in early education will require wisdom, courage and a stalwart approach. Those in Maryland who are making early childhood education a priority know that the biggest payoffs from this work will be many years away, when these now young people are leading more fulfilled lives with higher-paying jobs and making greater contributions to the societies in which they live.

But these individuals will not be the only beneficiaries. Progress in early education will make Maryland more attractive to both individuals and companies and ultimately enhance America's competitiveness in the world.

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