

Virginia business leaders stress importance of early childhood education
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RICHMOND — More than 100 Virginia business executives and education officials gathered at the Jefferson Hotel in Richmond on Tuesday for a luncheon and briefing on connections between high-quality child care and the development of the state's workforce.

"Business executives have a clear vision for the development of human capacity," said Kathy Glazer, president of the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation. "They realize that they need to start building that capacity from the very beginning. If we don't capture the chance to develop those foundational skills in those first few years ... we are forever playing catch-up."

Tuesday's invitation-only luncheon, co-hosted by the VECF and the Virginia Chamber Foundation, featured two guest speakers: Laura Jana, an early childhood expert and author; and Shawn Boyer, founder of the Richmond-based companies Snagajob and goHappy.

Jana's latest book, "The Toddler Brain," focuses on the critical role of parents and early childhood educators in helping children to acquire the necessary skills for success the 21st-century workforce.

"You see this striking crossover between what's happening in the world of children and in the world of business," she said. "The '21st century toolkit' that everyone in business is talking about ... has its foundational development in the first five years of life. It is the same set of skills."

In "The Toddler Brain," Jana coined the term "QI Skills" to describe the qualities that children will need

to thrive as the world of work continues to change rapidly. QI Skills include self-management and collaboration with others; motivation and drive; creativity and curiosity; and adaptability and resilience in response to failure.

Jana acknowledged that some educators are uncomfortable with applying strategic planning and other business philosophies to child care and preschool.

“We want to protect what’s really pure and great about childhood,” she said. “I’m still talking about ... the fundamental role of caring, responsive adults. I just use language that all of us, in all of our different sectors, can relate to.”

Jana said U.S. companies lose \$4.4 billion annually due to child care-related absences.

In Boyer’s remarks, he said this figure represents only a fraction of the costs of failing to provide adequate child care.

“What’s most important to me is that it is stymieing the potential of millions of kids each year, and the future generations after that,” he said.

In 2000, Boyer founded Snagajob, an online employment website focusing on hourly-wage jobs. Snagajob now has 75 million hourly workers and 500,000 employer locations registered on its website.

Boyer was named America’s Small Business Person of the Year in 2008 by the Small Business Administration, and Virginia Business magazine’s Person of the Year in 2009. He stepped down as CEO at Snagajob in 2013.

In 2016, Boyer founded goHappy, a startup marketing a mobile app for making social plans and privately sharing group photos. The company has raised more than \$1.5 million in private investment.

Boyer said it’s important for education advocates and policymakers to engage with families struggling to find child care options.

“It’s easy sometimes for businesses to get lost in the metrics. It is just as important to have discovery sessions to learn about your target audience,” he said.

“Who is caring for [those children]? And who is going to make sure that they tap into their full potential in life?”

Bill Ermatinger, chairman of the VECF’s board and chief human resources officer for Huntington Ingalls Industries, said his shipbuilding company currently has thousands of unfilled positions in Newport News and in Mississippi, representing \$400 million in annual wages and revenue. He said Huntington Ingalls has struggled to find qualified applicants for these jobs.

“I can’t fix the applicant who is in front of me today,” Ermatinger said. “We needed to work on [early childhood learning] 20 years ago ... We have to act now, and we have to act collectively.”

“The business community has to get much more engaged than we are,” he said. “Local, state and federal officials have to get engaged. It’s going to take all of us working together to move this needle.”

Glazer said the VECF is looking ahead to next year’s General Assembly, which will work with a new

governor.

“Virginia will have the opportunity to make some really important investments,” she said. “We have an opportunity to be a leader, to think with an entrepreneurial spirit, and use research-based policies to build healthy, productive citizens.”

For the past two years, the VECF, in consultation with the Virginia Department of Education, has awarded \$250,000 in Mixed Delivery Grants to help localities place at-risk 4-year-olds in private preschool programs.

The United Way-Thomas Jefferson Area in Charlottesville was awarded one of the foundation’s first Mixed Delivery Grants in 2016. The grant has placed about 70 4-year olds in community-based child care programs, while supporting on-site coaching and professional development for local preschool teachers.

Mike Chinn, president of market intelligence at S&P Global in Charlottesville, attended Tuesday’s briefing and was a guest speaker at last year’s event. Chinn is the chairman of the local United Way’s School Readiness Impact Team.

“Over the years that I have been involved [in early childhood education], there has been this convergence of evidence, outreach, research and science,” Chinn said. “What used to be a theoretical exercise now has a compelling case. No one can really argue with what the value is.”

“The next phase for us is to continue to organize different stakeholders around this issue, and to find funding for it,” he said. “It is a very compelling opportunity.”