We all want freedom, to live in a country where democracy is celebrated and protected. Those desires necessitate having a strong, effective military. As former Secretary of the Navy John Dalton states, “The most effective long-term investment we can make for a strong military is in the health and education of the American people. If we want to ensure that we have a strong, capable fighting force, we need to help America’s youth succeed academically, graduate from high school and abide by the law.”

A 2009 Pentagon report states that seventy-five percent of Americans aged 17 to 24 cannot join the United States Military. The three most common causes behind this problem are lack of a high school diploma, existence of a criminal record, and weight problems or some combination of these three factors. According to this report, one out of four young Americans lacks a high school diploma; one in ten is ineligible due to a criminal conviction, and 27 percent of young Americans cannot enlist because they are overweight.

Providing quality early childhood learning experiences can decrease these problems. The first five years of life are critical for brain development; during these years the architecture of the brain is being built. Neural development continues throughout life, but during the first five years of life, the foundation is set for the rest of life. Quality early childhood education programs create a strong foundation not just for cognitive learning, but also for lifelong traits such as learning how to play well with others, persistence, and differentiating right from wrong. There is over 40 years of research showing the effectiveness of quality early childhood education programs. Participation in quality early childhood education programs has been effective in increasing high school graduation rates and post-secondary education attendance rates and decreasing drug use and other criminal behaviors.

Quality early childhood education programs provide military leaders with applicants who not only have the ability to operate high-tech equipment and computers, but who also have the ability to work well in teams.

The United States Military itself realizes the value of providing quality early childhood education programs. It provides 800 Child Development Centers worldwide that provide quality early childhood programs to children aged 6 weeks to 12 years old from military and Department of Defense families.

In 2009 for the first time since the inception of the All-Volunteer Force in 1973, all active Service and Reserve units not only met their recruitment goals but also exceeded quality benchmarks set by the Department of Defense. This milestone is attributed to higher military pay and benefits, the perception of military service as meaningful, and the Great Recession. As
the economy recovers, the private sector will compete with the Military for high-quality labor. As a nation, we need to increase the number and quality of young Americans who are willing to serve in the Military. The lifeblood of the Military is its recruits.

Over 200 years ago, our nation’s first Commander-in-Chief George Washington stated, “There is nothing so likely to produce peace as to be well prepared to meet the enemy.” Preparation today starts at birth. To build the military of the future, we need to invest in early childhood education today.