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Early learning critical, but gaps persist

Vision 2015 calls for tuition aid

By ALISON KEPNER, The News Journal

Posted Monday, April 2, 2007

The research seems clear: Children who attended high-quality preschool programs do better in school, are less likely to break the law and are more likely to have high-paying jobs as adults.

Yet most Delaware youngsters never get that advantage.

Only 5 percent of Delaware children younger than 5 are enrolled in nationally accredited preschool programs, according to the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

A 2003 University of Delaware study of early childhood programs in the state called the quality of curriculum planning and implementation "weak," particularly in the areas of math, science and -- for some -- language and literacy. Infant-toddler programming also was criticized.

Vision 2015, a coalition of community leaders trying to turn Delaware's average school system into a world leader in the next eight years, calls for greater state investment in early childhood education. The group argues a strong start ensures children enter kindergarten prepared to learn.



Three-year-old Kaelyn Smith of Claymont peers at a piece of Play-Doh at the child care center at Delaware Technical & Community College's Wilmington campus. (Buy photo)

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Preschool teacher Nicholas Tavavres works with Juliette Hartmann, 5, at the child care center at Delaware Technical & Community College in Wilmington. (Buy photo)

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"So much of the brain is developed in the first three years. If children don't get that correct wiring of the brain, they often begin school at a deficit," said Ann Wicks, chairwoman of the Governor's Early Care and Education Council and United Way's Success by Six.

The News Journal/CARLA VARISCO

"We know that children who do not have high-quality early care and education, whether it be at home or through child care, begin school with a vocabulary of 5,000 compared to their peers who begin school with a vocabulary of 20,000 words," she said. "It's like walking into a room with people speaking a foreign language."

"It's no wonder these children get frustrated and act out and have behavior problems," she said. "They are up against such difficult odds."

Quality matters

A long-term study of the effects of high-quality early care on low-income 3- and 4-year-olds found those who attended preschool - interviewed at age 40 -- had higher earnings, were more likely to hold a job, had committed fewer crimes and were more likely to have graduated from high school. The 2005 High/Scope Perry Preschool study found a return to society of more than \$17 for every tax dollar invested in early education.

The quality of a program is important, said Evelyn Keating, provider services director for the nonprofit Family & Workplace Connection.

"When you walk into a 2-year-old classroom, you don't want to see a 2-year-old at a desk being told to color in the lines, because that is not developmentally appropriate. They learn through play," Keating said.

"It used to be thought that any place a child was was better than no place at all, and now we know that quality matters," she said. "The qualifications, the educational level of the classroom teacher and director of the program are really key."

That is why Lisa Strusowski of Earleville, Md., enrolled her two daughters at Delaware Technical & Community College's Wilmington campus early child care center.

"I was happy because it was more than a day care," said Strusowski, an instruction coordinator at the college.

Through developmentally appropriate activities, the children learn fine motor, gross motor and social skills as well as problem-solving, she said.

For Claymont mother Fay Smith, NAEYC accreditation of the center is important. "The first several years [are] the foundation of the whole educational experience," said Smith, also a student majoring in early childhood education.

Daughter Kaelyn, who turns 3 next month, already knows her alphabet and can count to 20. She is starting to write some letters and knows letter sounds.

"The early childhood often is overlooked. That old-school mentality is that that is not really as important as it is later on in life," Smith said. "[But] ... that experience is going to follow them on to school."

The federal government began the Head Start program in 1965 to provide preschool to low-income children. The United States spent \$6.8 billion on Head Start in 2005-06, serving 11 percent of the nation's 4-year-olds and 7 percent of 3-year-olds. About 1,540 Delaware children participated, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research.



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Delaware also already provides services for some children. The state's Early Childhood Assistance Program began in 1994 to expand access to low-income 4-year-olds. ECAP programs are modeled after Head Start. And the state implemented a curriculum framework for state-funded pre-kindergarten, the Delaware Early Learning Foundations, in 2003.

About 8 percent of Delaware 4-year-olds were enrolled in state programs last year, according to the education research institute, which estimated state spending at \$3,482 per child.

Governments chip in

State investment in early childhood education varies, ranging from less than \$1,000 per pupil in Maryland to more than \$9,300 in New Jersey, according to a November report by the Committee for Economic Development. The average is \$3,500.

The Vision 2015 plan recommends Delaware leaders invest more by providing tuition subsidies for low-income 3- and 4-year-olds. The plan calls for strengthening the quality of the state's programs by requiring providers to participate in the Delaware Stars for Early Success Program, a pilot effort now under way to rate programs. Under the Vision 2015 plan, only those earning high marks would be eligible for state subsidies.

Government subsidies also need to be increased, Wicks said, noting her council supports paying providers 75 percent of the fair market rate. The current amount varies depending on service and county, with some receiving only 63 percent.

Vision 2015 leaders haven't released a price for this aspect of their proposal, but the entire plan's implementation is expected to cost at least \$100 million in public and private funding over several years.

Delaware lawmakers previously have failed in their attempts to introduce bills that would create a tiered reimbursement system for providers based on a quality rating system. Gov. Ruth Ann Minner's proposed budget includes funding for early childhood, including professional development stipends and enhancements to ECAP.

Better education, pay

Most early childhood education experts agree that to improve the quality of such programs they must improve the education and pay of teachers.

The UD study found 34 percent of Delaware early-education teachers reported their highest level of education as a high school or general equivalency diploma. That compares to 20 percent of teachers nationwide. About 19 percent of Delaware teachers had a bachelor's degree, while nationally 33 percent did.

"We have some individuals in some cases where the people have less than high school [education]," said Michael Gammel-McCormick, University of Delaware's Center for Disabilities Studies director and lead author of the study. "They don't have all that child development background or even the basic health and safety background. They don't have the literacy development education."

Low pay makes it difficult to attract well-educated teachers. Kindergarten teachers may earn \$50,000 for 10 months of work versus an early childhood teacher who may earn \$17,000 for a year, Wicks said. "We've got to do something about the wages. It's going to be very hard to attract and keep really qualified people in Delaware if we continue to pay them such poor wages."

A study last year found the average wage at about \$9 an hour, but that includes the best-paid teachers at part-day preschool and Head Start programs, Gammel-McCormick said. "You still start at \$6.50 an hour and work your way up."

Of course, increasing pay also would increase costs for parents. While low-income families qualify for government assistance, middle-income families, who may struggle to pay for child care costs now, do not.

Delaware preschool programs cost up to \$1,000 for a four-week month. How much more they would cost depends on how much wages increase.

"There's a role for the government, not just for low-income children but for all children, because we want all children to come to kindergarten ready," Keating said. "The burden is not only on the parents."

Editor's Note: This is the eighth in a continuing series of articles examining the effectiveness of Vision 2015 education reform ideas elsewhere. Next week's article will look at engaging parents and the community. Contact Alison Kepner at 324-2965 or akepner@delawareonline.com.

SUCSESSES ELSEWHERE

ILLINOIS

Vision 2015 leaders point to Illinois as a national leader. The state last year passed Pre-K for All legislation to offer access for all 3- and 4-year-olds and establish licensing and program standards. Illinois appropriated \$45 million for fiscal year 2007 -- enough to fund quality education for 10,000 more children.

The plan envisions a five-year, phased-in expansion requiring another \$45 million a year. The goal is to serve 190,000 children by the time it is fully implemented, according to the Ounce of Prevention Fund, which advocated for the program.

Nancy Shier, the group's public policy director, said Illinois leaders want to ensure all children, not just low-income ones, have access.

"Often children in the lowest-quality child care are not the low-income families because they are eligible for government programs," Shier said. "The working families up to [those earning] \$70,000 or \$80,000 are the families accessing this lower-quality child care. ... They can't afford on their own to pay for high-quality child care."

NORTH CAROLINA

North Carolina has established the More at Four program to provide pre-kindergarten for all at-risk 4-year-olds and the Smart Start early childhood program to serve families with children up to age 5.

The public-private Smart Start initiative now gets \$203.6 million from the state and has raised \$257 million in donations since it began. Local nonprofits administer the funds, which are used to improve the quality of child care, make child care more affordable and accessible, provide access to health services, and offer family support.

WASHINGTON

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation last year provided funding for the public-private Thrive by Five Washington. State lawmakers also created a new Department of Early Learning after completing an 18-month comprehensive study of the state's education system. To prepare the state's children to enter kindergarten with the skills they need to succeed, Thrive by Five invests in four key areas:

- Statewide infrastructure, community and parent education, demonstration communities and promising models -- local, community-driven early learning efforts that have highly trained teachers who are rewarded for positive results
- Research-driven developmental curriculum
- Research-based education and programs for parents
- Low child-to-teacher ratios.

TELL US

How do you think Delaware schools need to change to make the state a world leader in education? What programs or features does your ideal "school of the future" include? E-mail

akepner@delawareonline.com with your thoughts.

STORYCHAT

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Posted by: TheWholeTruth- Mon Apr 02, 2007 11:02 pm

CMFRED,
Great job with your kid. I applaud you.
IT is Parenting Parenting Parenting Parenting Parenting Parenting
Thanks CMFRED.

NOW for the rest:
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GET it. It is what this study left out.
Sure the subjects of this study, get their salary from government
subsidies for early childhood education. They are going to propose the
need for early childhood education. So they GET MONEY for THEMSELVES.
Stuff GOOD parents are prepared to do.

AT risk kids, are the progeny of already at risk parents. We can not
sterilize the parents. BUT damnit, that does not mean that we
should raise their kids.

Make up your mind. Do we pay for the children of these parents?
Who is helping the rest of us pay for raising our kids?
Some say it is not fair?
Excuse me.
If I can do a better job raising my kids than you, I am going to do
JUST THAT. AND I do not need the GOVT to decide that since
I can do better, that the GOVT has to step in and help you.

THAT is the competition for the 21st century. I'll prepare my kid to
get that education and learning, so my kid can compete successfully
against yours in getting that job.

The real answer for at risk children and children with out parents
who are up to the job of parenting is ORPHANAGES.
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As those in the hood are happy to say in other venues ==>
..... Give it up. Give up your kids to the Government.

No more subsidies for poor excuses for parents. Give them up.
No more children having children. Give them up.
Can not teach them to count to 20, tell colors? Give them up.

If it takes a village to raise a child, and the parents can not do the job,
turn over your child to the village.

.

Posted by: JANE AUSTEN- Mon Apr 02, 2007 10:29 pm

I'm glad your child has some actual learning. However, many kids who stay at home and don't
go to preschool spend their days watching TV nonstop or playing video games. Evidence that
either of these provide any 'real' education is shaky, at best.

I'm glad your child knows some basic things but I wonder about how well socialized your child is. With a greater percentage of parents both working outside the home and children in some kind of daycare situation, children that are not used to larger social groups have definite disadvantages when they start kindergarten.

Posted by: Boohoo- Mon Apr 02, 2007 8:57 pm

Thats nice that your daughter goes to the DTCC child care, would she go there if you had to pay out of pocket for it?

Posted by: soynog- Mon Apr 02, 2007 1:55 pm

The discussion is centering around the desirability of having a stay-at-home parent versus two-earner families. Briefly during the '50s and '60s, the one-earner family was viable for many thanks to a manufacturing economy, high unionization rates, and massive government subsidies for housing. Whether we should re-institute those policies is worth discussing.

What this article talks about is much narrower though. Assuming kids are in daycare/preschool, how do we encourage NATIONALLY accredited facilities (based on curriculum, developmentally appropriateness, good physical facilities) versus STATE accredited facilities (based on no lead paint coming off walls, electrical outlets covered, children not kept in cages)?

Posted by: angelsan36- Mon Apr 02, 2007 1:03 pm

I think we did this before, back in the 50's, it was called Head Start. The qualifications of the teachers and curriculum was so successful, that it took public school teachers, four years to knock out these kids education and at last the program itself because it was so threatening to them.

Of course Early Child Education is vital. For pete's sake, have we forgotten what parenthood is all about???

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