

The Mercury

Pottstown's PEAK lauded as one of top in state (video)

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[POTTSTOWN](#) — If necessity is the mother of invention, than many districts in First Suburbs have become the mother of all innovators.

"Districts like Pottstown and Norristown, districts that have great economic and social needs, are in the forefront of 'continuous improvement,'" Reed Lindley, assistant superintendent of Pottstown Schools told the First Suburbs audience of 300 last week in the Community Room of Montgomery County Community College's West Campus.

"We are getting results, we are improving reading and math skills, and we are reducing referrals to special education," he said.

One of the most innovative of these efforts is in the realm of early education.

Just one day earlier, those efforts were showcased in the same room when the Pottstown Early Action for Kindergarten Readiness program hosted its partners to celebrate its successes.

Several years ago, when Pottstown looked at how to get the best bang for its educational buck, the answer was quick to surface — early education.

Getting to children early, before they even enter school, and helping their parents and pre-schools build a solid foundation to start school is the best preventative plan not only for success, but for avoiding the cost of having those children enter costly special education programs when they fall behind.

Pottstown was already the first district in the Commonwealth to offer a free pre-kindergarten program to the community, but it is not utilized by all those eligible.

To further those efforts, the district looked outside itself, looking for partners in the community to implement a quality pre-school program that aligns with the school district curriculum.

Partners include several Head Start programs, the Montgomery Early Learning Center, the YWCA and the YMCA.

Jeff Sparagana, Pottstown's director of education, said the results are evident. PEAK was included in a recent study of early childhood education programs in the state which found, among other things, "all ethnic groups made gains, especially in the areas of spoken language, pre-reading, numbers, classroom behavior and daily living skills."

Statewide, 14 percent more children who were identified as "at-risk or developmentally delayed" and participate in these programs perform at expected levels when entering kindergarten than those who don't, the study found.

Even better, 65 percent of "high-risk and vulnerable" pre-school children showed "significant gains" in development and early learning skills when in these programs and "actual developmental progress rates" after participating and some even exceeded the statistical expectations established in national studies.

The study singled out the PEAK program, noting that 82 percent of children who participated had increased their readiness for kindergarten.

In Pottstown, 79 percent of the borough's 3- and 4-year-olds are enrolled in some kind of PEAK program, "that's about 600-plus." More than 100 of them are funded directly through a Pre-K Counts state grant program targeted to early education programs.

Invited to tell the crowd how the program at partner Montgomery Early Learning Center had prepared her son Ethan, Michelle Chin's voice cracked as she expressed her gratitude.

"This program, it's meant a lot to my family," she said. "The program exemplifies everything that kids need."

Stephan Bagnato, a development school psychologist and professor of pediatrics and psychologist at the University of Pittsburgh, said simply "the PEAK program really is stellar. It is a flagship for the school district and the state. Of the 21 similar programs in the state, it is in the top three."