

Business Leaders Discuss Early Childhood Education Programs Pottstown Mercury 6-7-08

By Laura Catalano, Special to The Mercury

KING OF PRUSSIA — An investment in early childhood education is an investment in the future success of the entire community. That was the message conveyed at a recent Business Leaders Summit on Early Childhood Education held in King of Prussia.

The summit was sponsored by the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania, in partnership with a number of organizations, including the TriCounty Area Chamber of Commerce and the Pottstown Early Action for Kindergarten Readiness (PEAK).

Speakers at the summit made a case for the economic impact of early childhood education programs.

“Research tells us clearly that if we were ever to invest a dollar wisely in the years before birth to age five we would have a return on that investment of at least seven dollars that we would not have to spend on police, prosecution and prison,” said keynote speaker David Lawrence, Jr., president of the Early Childhood Initiative Foundation and former publisher of the Miami Herald.

“These are matters of business investment as well as the self-interest of all of us,” he continued.

Lawrence praised Pottstown School District’s PEAK partnership program, which strives to give every child in Pottstown access to high quality early childhood education. He noted that the program, which has been recognized by the state as an exemplary partnership, now serves 550 children in 35 community-based classrooms.

“This is a splendid example of a community seeking to ensure that every three and four-year-old has the maximum opportunity for real school readiness,” said Lawrence. “How fortunate you are in Pottstown and elsewhere to have such leadership and commitment.”

Nevertheless, he made it clear that Pottstown’s work with early childhood education is far from done, observing that “30 percent of your children cannot read at minimally proficient levels in third grade.” What’s more, he said only 22 percent of children in the region are in “quality early learning centers.”

Pottstown School District Director of Education Jeff Sparagana spoke about the PEAK program, which aims to raise the quality of early learning programs in Pottstown through five key strategies: community outreach, family engagement, professional development, health and wellness and kindergarten transition.

Now in its second year, the program provides resources, professional development and technical assistance to 11 early learning partners, such as childcare centers, thereby impacting more than 500 children.

Through Pennsylvania’s Pre-K Counts program, the Pottstown School District provides 108 students with full-day instructional pre-kindergarten programs.

“It is evident in the research that investing early pays significant dividends,” Sparagana said. “But in order to make significant and sustainable change with any initiative you must have access to resources, which computes into dollars.”

He pointed to the support of the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania as a cornerstone of PEAK’s success.

“Our children, the leaders of tomorrow, will compete globally for jobs. Education and partnerships are the only sustainable equalizers,” he said.

In the first year of PEAK’s implementation, the United Way provided \$200,000 of the \$385,000 cost of the program.

According to Steven Bagnato, of the University of Pittsburgh, money spent on such early childhood initiatives have proven, over time, to have a significant payoff. Statewide, 10,000 children are involved in 30 public/private preschool partnerships, such as PEAK.

Of those children, 27 percent were at high risk for special education or retention.

Bagnato's research indicated that the average school district retention rate for children who did not attend pre-kindergarten programs was 24 percent. That dropped to only three percent for those who did attend such programs.

Similarly, 21 percent of children who did not attend a pre-k program were identified for special education services, as opposed to only one percent of children who did attend.

"The message to all of us in education and business alike is to take action or suffer the consequences of a pool of inadequate candidates to join your organizations," concluded Sparagana.

Lawrence noted that his home state, Florida, currently provides pre-kindergarten to all four-year-olds. Such programs have their best chance of being accepted when they target all children, not simply those from poor socio-economic backgrounds.

"The poor need more help, of course, but the way to help them the most is to help everyone. The American dream embraces all children, because all children need the basics," he said.