

Early Education is Investment in Future

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The Associated Press reported last week that despite evidence which underscores the value of early childhood education, states are cutting pre-kindergarten programs in reaction to funding difficulties.

The report cited research that shows children from low-income families who start kindergarten without first attending a quality education program enter school an estimated 18 months behind their peers. Many never catch up, and research shows they are more likely to need special education services and to drop out.

But in the current recession, roughly a quarter of the nation's 4-year-olds and more than half of 3-year-olds attend no preschool, either public or private, AP reported, pointing to examples throughout the nation where funding cuts have drastically reduced or eliminated early ed.

In Pottstown, however, educators are continuing to buck the trend with a program of partnerships that has received accolades statewide and nationally as an example of commitment to pre-K programs.

Although 40 states currently fund pre-K programs, Pennsylvania included, funding cuts began slowing in the 2009-10 school year. Jeff Sparagana, assistant superintendent for Pottstown Schools and a member of the Governor's Task Force on Early Education, said he is not aware of any Pennsylvania districts which have cut early education, but cuts have been discussed. Kindergarten was even on the list that could conceivably be cut during Pottstown's budget deliberations last year, although no one seriously pursued it.

The level of state funding remains a serious concern, says Mary Rieck, coordinator of Pottstown's PEAK program. PEAK stands for Pottstown Early Action for Kindergarten readiness. The program partners with other agencies, such as the Freedom Valley YMCA, to offer child care programs that incorporate education. As partners with Pottstown schools, PEAK programs help low-income families get the important step children need to succeed in school.

Assessment scores for students who have participated in PEAK programs are tracked and show those students have higher scores than those students who are not known to have had any early education support. That means more drop-outs and, ultimately, a higher cost to society.

"Every dollar spent on early education saves \$7 in the long run on services those kids end up needing from taxpayers," including prison, said Jessica Vogt, director of quality assurance for the YMCA's child care program.

Not only does the funding subsidizing low-income families allow their children access to quality early education, it also allows their parents to work.

“It would really affect the working poor, who can’t keep their jobs without child care,” Rieck said, of eliminating these programs. “... If they lose child care, they have to quit their jobs and then they’re back on public assistance. I’m not sure how that ends up saving any taxpayer money.”

Early childhood education is not babysitting, as critics may claim, and it’s not money wasted. Pre-K programs are an investment in the future.

Pottstown was among the first districts in the region to recognize that and to develop partnerships which help families and which prepare kids for school. The “Pre-K Counts” initiative is called that for a reason: Early education matters to our future and should be preserved in state and federal funding.