

National Expert Applauds Pottstown Early Ed Program Pottstown Mercury Editorial 6-7-08

David Lawrence Jr. is a nationally recognized speaker and president of the Early Childhood Initiative Foundation. He has come to Pottstown previously to speak in support of early learning and the value that childhood education offers a community.

Last week, he returned to the area to speak to a broader, regional group, but the message praising Pottstown's initiative was the same.

"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 Lawrence, in a keynote speech at a Business Leaders Summit on Early Childhood Education held in King of Prussia.

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

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).

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 3- and 4-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."

Now in its second year, PEAK provides resources, professional development and technical assistance to 11 early learning partners, such as childcare centers, affecting 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.

The United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania was also praised at the summit as a cornerstone of PEAK's success. In the first year of PEAK's implementation, the United Way provided \$200,000 of the \$385,000 cost of the program.

The program has also been praised by the state and other experts on early childhood education.

PEAK with the support of the United Way is making a difference in children's future and putting Pottstown on the map as a place that understands the value of early learning.