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Pottstown program aims for peak performance in kindergarten

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Soon after Victoria Dransoff and her partner became foster parents to a 4-year-old boy named Rory last year, they started to worry that he would not be ready to start kindergarten this year.

Rory, who had already lived in several foster homes by the time he arrived at Dransoff's home in Pottstown, was so uncoordinated he frequently tripped over his own feet. His vocabulary was limited, and he had a hard time articulating his words well enough to be understood.

But with the intervention of a unique collaboration of public and private partners known as Pottstown Early Action for Kindergarten Readiness, Rory is set to start kindergarten in the fall. Among the partners in PEAK are the Pottstown School District, local early child-care providers, and the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania.

Today, Rory can count to 100, knows the alphabet, plays team sports, and has made major progress in his behavioral problems, Dransoff said. She believes PEAK is largely responsible for many of the improvements.

"We've been very grateful that the program has been available, because for a kid like Rory, I think he would have really had issues going into kindergarten," said Dransoff, a teacher at an alternative school.

Hundreds of children in Pottstown have benefited from PEAK, which tries to ensure that every child, regardless of circumstance, is prepared for kindergarten. Now five years old, the program relies on public and private funding to help pay for prekindergarten, a battery of health screenings, therapists for children who need help, teacher training, and other efforts.

Harriet Dichter, national director of the First Five Years Fund, a nonprofit that aims to improve federal policy for early education, is among those who have praised the program.

"Pottstown PEAK has raised the standards, performance, and impact of all of the early-education programs," Dichter said. "They have embraced accountability for the public resources, showing great results for the children, and winning well-deserved kudos from the parents and early-childhood, school, business, and civic leaders."

According to the Pottstown School District, PEAK has already created noticeable changes in kindergarten readiness. The percentage of children entering kindergarten with adequate literacy skills has increased from 45 percent to 56 percent since 2006-07, for example.

Treena Ferguson, a kindergarten teacher at Edgewood Elementary School, said PEAK made a huge difference, especially for parents who cannot afford preschool.

Ferguson said she had seen improvements in fine motor skills, such as coloring, holding a pencil, recognizing letters, and counting.

Through the program, she also spends time before the school year visiting with PEAK child-care partners to talk with incoming kindergartners about what to expect and to arrange for them to visit the building, which helps alleviate some of the stress of their transition.

Jeff Sparagana, an assistant superintendent in Pottstown schools, was instrumental in the creation of the program. In 2006, the state had funding available to create public-private partnerships for prekindergarten education, and Pottstown was among a number of communities that received a grant.

While many of the other communities' efforts dwindled as state funding faded, Pottstown sought out other funding to keep the program alive, Sparagana said. Today, PEAK has an annual budget of more than \$1 million from grants alone, and additional money from the state for Pre-K Counts, the state's prekindergarten program for low-income families.

Sparagana said that 45 percent of the children younger than 5 were in low-income households, and that 65 percent of Pottstown's students were eligible for free or reduced lunch.

It is important, he said, to make people aware of the program so they "understand that we've got to start early, because that's where the best investment is."

A key component of PEAK is educating preschool teachers to improve early-childhood education. In 2006-07, just 54 percent of staff at PEAK's partner programs, which include Montgomery County Head Start, Montgomery Early Learning Centers, and the Pottstown YMCA, had at least a child-development associate credential, which requires one year of study. Today, the figure is 84 percent.

"Once you improve the quality of staff, you improve the quality of education," said Joan Daly, executive director of the Freedom Valley YMCA at Pottstown.

Helping staff members improve their educations has a ripple effect in the community, Daly added. "If you can help a staff member make more than \$7 an

hour or get them into a career where they can provide for their families, it's a circle. We're helping everybody through this program."