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## Off to a good start even before school

Once upon a time most people assumed success in school depended mostly on smarts -- that children fortunate enough to be endowed with certain kinds of intelligence were more likely to do well, while others wouldn't.

Today we see this for the fairy tale it is. Just as we recognize there are many ways for a child to be intelligent, we understand that many factors help determine how well a child will do in school -- including early preparation.

For example, children exposed to books early are more likely to be good readers, which predicts they will be higher achievers throughout their school careers. In the same way, children who hear lots of spoken language at home will become more confident, fluent readers.

Research has confirmed that family income is a big reason why some children come to school better prepared. One study found that kindergarteners in low-income homes typically have vocabularies barely a fourth as large as their more affluent peers. That preparation gap has nothing to do with intelligence and everything to do with opportunity.

Early childhood education has a track record in reducing the preparation gap. We are heartened by the support for these programs in Delaware. In her State of the State address in January, Gov. Minner called for \$500,000 for early childhood education. Her recommendation underscores her endorsement of Vision 2015, a plan for world-class schools. Early childhood education is one of Vision 2015's building blocks.

Gov. Minner also proposed that early childhood programs get education dollars saved through cost efficiencies recommended by her Leadership for Education Achievement in Delaware Committee.

These investments will pay big dividends. Numerous studies show that every dollar spent in early childhood education returns between \$7 and \$16 in savings, including fewer students in remedial or special education, fewer teen pregnancies and high school dropouts, and fewer adults on welfare and in the criminal justice system.

That's why the Vision 2015 recommendation to extend quality early childhood education to more children of low-income families makes fiscal sense. But the key word is quality.

For more than a decade, this state and others have moved toward higher standards and stricter accountability in public schools. How can we accept any less of early childhood programs?

This is the reasoning behind Delaware Stars for Early Success, the rating and improvement system for early childhood education. A public-private partnership launched in 2007, Delaware Stars assesses providers in four categories: qualifications and professional development, learning environment and curriculum, family and community partnerships, management and administration. Each provider is rated with one to five stars. Technical assistance and incentive grants help programs increase their ratings.

Delaware Stars just finished working with 15 programs, including child care centers, family providers and before- and after-school programs from all parts of the state. The goal is to bring most early childhood programs to level 3 or higher by 2015. To get some idea of that challenge, consider that a 2002 University of Delaware study rated 70 percent of the state's licensed child care programs as mediocre or poor.

To address funding for programs that enroll children from low-income families, Delaware Stars' strategy includes working with the state on reimbursements tied to the quality of the programs.

The United Way just announced support to bring 60 more providers into the program. Contributors include the

Departments of Education, Health & Social Services and Public Health; JPMorgan Chase; PNC Bank Delaware; ING; Social Venture Partners; the Delaware Business Roundtable Education Committee; and Nemours Health and Prevention Services.

Of course, raising the quality of 75 programs is just a start. Each year, as many as 65,000 children from infancy to age 5 could be enrolled in early childhood programs -- including 22,000 from low-income homes throughout Delaware.

To ensure that high-quality programs are available we are asking the Legislature to write a requirement into the Delaware code that brings Delaware Stars under state oversight, and to reallocate resources as recommended by LEAD to ensure sustainability of this valuable program.

These requests are likely to yield considerable financial benefits. Quality early education will offer all Delaware's children a fair chance to be happily ever after.

Connie Bond Stuart is president, PNC Bank Delaware. PNC supports Grow Up Great, a 10-year, \$100 million investment in school readiness by age 5. Ann D. Wick leads the Delaware Early Childhood Council.

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