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# Early learning critical, but gaps persist

## Vision 2015 calls for tuition aid

By ALISON KEPNER, The News Journal

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The research seems clear: Children who attended high-quality preschool programs do better in school, are less likely to break the law and are more likely to have high-paying jobs as adults.

Yet most Delaware youngsters never get that advantage.

Only 5 percent of Delaware children younger than 5 are enrolled in nationally accredited preschool programs, according to the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

A 2003 University of Delaware study of early childhood programs in the state called the quality of curriculum planning and implementation "weak," particularly in the areas of math, science and -- for some -- language and literacy. Infant-toddler programming also was criticized.

Vision 2015, a coalition of community leaders trying to turn Delaware's average school system into a world leader in the next eight years, calls for greater state investment in early childhood education. The group argues a strong start ensures children enter kindergarten prepared to learn.

"So much of the brain is developed in the first three years. If children don't get that correct wiring of the brain, they often begin school at a deficit," said Ann Wicks, chairwoman of the Governor's Early Care and Education Council and United Way's Success by Six.

"We know that children who do not have high-quality early care and education, whether it be at home or through child care, begin school with a vocabulary of 5,000 compared to their peers who begin school with a vocabulary of 20,000 words," she said. "It's like walking into a room with people speaking a foreign language."

"It's no wonder these children get frustrated and act out and have behavior problems," she said. "They are up against such difficult odds."

### Quality matters

A long-term study of the effects of high-quality early care on low-income 3- and 4-year-olds found those who attended preschool -- interviewed at age 40 -- had higher earnings, were more likely to hold a job, had committed fewer crimes and were more likely to have graduated from high school. The 2005 High/Scope Perry Preschool study found a return to society of more than \$17 for every tax dollar invested in early education.

The quality of a program is important, said Evelyn Keating, provider services director for the nonprofit Family & Workplace Connection.

"When you walk into a 2-year-old classroom, you don't want to see a 2-year-old at a desk being told to color in the lines, because that is not developmentally appropriate. They learn through play," Keating said.

"It used to be thought that any place a child was was better than no place at all, and now we know that quality matters," she said. "The qualifications, the educational level of the classroom teacher and director of the program are really key."

That is why Lisa Strusowski of Earleville, Md., enrolled her two daughters at Delaware Technical & Community College's Wilmington campus early child care center.

"I was happy because it was more than a day care," said Strusowski, an instruction coordinator at the college.

Through developmentally appropriate activities, the children learn fine motor, gross motor and social skills as well as problem-solving, she said.

For Claymont mother Fay Smith, NAEYC accreditation of the center is important. "The first several years [are] the foundation of the whole educational experience," said Smith, also a student majoring in early childhood education.

Daughter Kaelyn, who turns 3 next month, already knows her alphabet and can count to 20. She is starting to write some letters and knows letter sounds.

"The early childhood often is overlooked. That old-school mentality is that that is not really as important as it is later on in life," Smith said. "[But] ... that experience is going to follow them on to school."

The federal government began the Head Start program in 1965 to provide preschool to low-income children. The United States spent \$6.8 billion on Head Start in 2005-06, serving 11 percent of the nation's 4-year-olds and 7 percent of 3-year-olds. About 1,540 Delaware children participated, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research.

Delaware also already provides services for some children. The state's Early Childhood Assistance Program began in 1994 to expand access to low-income 4-year-olds. ECAP programs are modeled after Head Start. And the state implemented a curriculum framework for state-funded pre-kindergarten, the Delaware Early Learning Foundations, in 2003.

About 8 percent of Delaware 4-year-olds were enrolled in state programs last year, according to the education research institute, which estimated state spending at \$3,482 per child.

### **Governments chip in**

State investment in early childhood education varies, ranging from less than \$1,000 per pupil in Maryland to more than \$9,300 in New Jersey, according to a November report by the Committee for Economic Development. The average is \$3,500.

The Vision 2015 plan recommends Delaware leaders invest more by providing tuition subsidies for low-income 3- and 4-year-olds. The plan calls for strengthening the quality of the state's programs by requiring providers to participate in the Delaware Stars for Early Success Program, a pilot effort now under way to rate programs. Under the Vision 2015 plan, only those earning high marks would be eligible for state subsidies.

Government subsidies also need to be increased, Wicks said, noting her council supports paying providers 75 percent of the fair market rate. The current amount varies depending on service and county, with some receiving only 63 percent.

Vision 2015 leaders haven't released a price for this aspect of their proposal, but the entire plan's implementation is expected to cost at least \$100 million in public and private funding over several years.

Delaware lawmakers previously have failed in their attempts to introduce bills that would create a tiered reimbursement system for providers based on a quality rating system. Gov. Ruth Ann Minner's proposed budget includes funding for early childhood, including professional development stipends and enhancements to ECAP.

### **Better education, pay**

Most early childhood education experts agree that to improve the quality of such programs they must improve the

education and pay of teachers.

The UD study found 34 percent of Delaware early-education teachers reported their highest level of education as a high school or general equivalency diploma. That compares to 20 percent of teachers nationwide. About 19 percent of Delaware teachers had a bachelor's degree, while nationally 33 percent did.

"We have some individuals in some cases where the people have less than high school [education]," said Michael Gammel-McCormick, University of Delaware's Center for Disabilities Studies director and lead author of the study. "They don't have all that child development background or even the basic health and safety background. They don't have the literacy development education."

Low pay makes it difficult to attract well-educated teachers. Kindergarten teachers may earn \$50,000 for 10 months of work versus an early childhood teacher who may earn \$17,000 for a year, Wicks said. "We've got to do something about the wages. It's going to be very hard to attract and keep really qualified people in Delaware if we continue to pay them such poor wages."

A study last year found the average wage at about \$9 an hour, but that includes the best-paid teachers at part-day preschool and Head Start programs, Gammel-McCormick said. "You still start at \$6.50 an hour and work your way up."

Of course, increasing pay also would increase costs for parents. While low-income families qualify for government assistance, middle-income families, who may struggle to pay for child care costs now, do not.

Delaware preschool programs cost up to \$1,000 for a four-week month. How much more they would cost depends on how much wages increase.

"There's a role for the government, not just for low-income children but for all children, because we want all children to come to kindergarten ready," Keating said. "The burden is not only on the parents."

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