

## Early Education May Pay Lifelong Dividends

By Karen Roebuck, *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*, pittsburghlive.com, April 2008

Jessica Carson was slightly skeptical when she was told her 7-week-old child would learn sign language in day care.

But at 15 months old, Lena knows more words in sign language than in spoken English, and her parents are learning with her.

"I love that my daughter speaks in sign language. She can't speak yet, but she can tell me when she wants to eat or wants milk and knows others, like 'bath' and 'all done,' " said Carson, 30, of the North Side.

Nationwide, educators, parents and government officials are placing more emphasis on early childhood education to help pre-empt academic achievement problems in high school. Kindergarten is too late to start learning for many children, experts say and studies show.

"Children today in our country, especially young children, are more prepared to enter school than at any time in our country's history," said Don Owens, spokesman for the National Association for the Education of Young Children, or NAEYC. It's a Washington-based nonprofit advocacy and accreditation agency.

Although some people question whether this puts too much pressure on preschool-aged kids, Owens said he believes it doesn't -- as long as they are taught in an age-appropriate method.

"Children learn best through play," Owens said. "We don't think it's bad that children are entering with more skills today."

### Love of learning

Four large studies begun since 1962 have shown that children in high-quality early learning programs have higher rates of high school graduation and college attendance, lower dropout rates, earn higher incomes and bear children four to five years later than their peers, Owens said.

"If you build a love of learning at an early age," he said, "that love of learning will sustain them throughout school, even if later there are challenges or if they go to a lower-quality school. ... Early childhood education -- it's a proven solution for any of the academic concerns that K through 12 is facing today."

In Pennsylvania, nearly 90,000 3- and 4-year-olds were enrolled in early education programs during the 2006-07 school year, up 69.8 percent in four years, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Education. Still, that was fewer than one-third -- 31 percent -- of all kids in that age group.

"We pretty much acknowledge that they're not as prepared as we'd like them to be," said Education Department spokeswoman Leah Harris.

To try to change that, the state offered Pre-K Counts, a program designed to provide more early education programs for children, beginning at age 3. Backed by \$75 million, the program, still in its first months, is expected to reach 11,000 children. Those in good programs are less likely to repeat grades, need special education services or seek public assistance later in life, Harris said.

Pennsylvania, however, does not require children to attend kindergarten.

Some children enter kindergarten with advanced skills, and the gap between them and those who are unprepared is wider than ever, according to Robert P. Strauss, a Carnegie Mellon University professor of economics and public policy who has studied education. Many unprepared students are the fallout of societal problems, such as a rampant drug culture, and often do not get attention or positive feedback, he said.

Because kindergarten pupils are not tested academically, no statistics exist on their readiness. Experts locally and nationally say pupils enter with a wide range of abilities. One-third of them show up without even the most basic skills, such as knowing letters or colors, recognizing their printed name or how to socialize, share or stand in line, Owens said, citing a 2001 U.S. Department of Education study.

That holds back children who enter with appropriate skills, because kindergarten teachers devote attention to those who are behind, leaving the others to stagnate, according to Owens. The results, though, are not noticed until a few years later when the youngsters begin testing, he said.

## **A pledge of \$100M**

The benefits of early childhood education have been proven in numerous Southern states, such as Arkansas, Owens said. Those states "were the laughingstocks of education" in the 1970s and 1980s because of the bad academic performance of high schoolers.

State leaders there decided to start students earlier, and they added strong early education programs. Today, high schools from those states typically have the highest rates of academically proficiency students, Owens said.

"I don't think there's anything we can do that's more important than provide quality, early childhood education to every child in the Pittsburgh Public Schools district," said board President Bill Isler, who is CEO of Family Communications and an ex officio member of the PNC Grow Up Great Advisory Council. The district offers all-day kindergarten and pre-K classes for 4- and 5-year-olds.

In 2004, The PNC Financial Services Group started PNC Grow Up Great, pledging \$100 million over 10 years to support early childhood education programs through funding, scholarships for preschoolers and teachers, volunteer efforts and advocacy. PNC does not operate any centers but supports existing programs with an emphasis on those serving low- and moderate-income families.

PNC believed if it focused resources on one issue, "we could really make a difference," said Mia Hallett Bernard, executive director of PNC Foundation. Surveys found that PNC employees overwhelmingly were concerned about children's and educational issues, she said. It was an issue on which few corporations were focusing.

PNC Grow Up Great has funded about 140 programs this year in Washington, D.C., Pennsylvania and the seven other states in which it does business, she said.

## **One block at a time**

Governments across the country are moving to set standards for early education and make it easily accessible for everyone, said Veronica Ent, chair of the Department of Education at St. Vincent College near Latrobe. Some rural areas in Appalachia, for example, do not have the resources for such programs, she said.

"Research shows that a low-quality early childhood education can do more damage to a child than not going at all, because they pick up bad habits (and) bad tendencies. They can view the school and school day as this random, chaotic thing," Owens said. "They can grow up psychologically damaged."

That's important with young children, who learn in "building blocks," adding to information learned the previous day, Owens said.

"It's not like ninth grade -- if you mess it up, you can go back and repeat it. You only get to do early childhood one time. If we mess it up, we mess it up really bad," he said.

Parents should choose programs with curriculums that are based on research findings, he said.

Only about 10,000 of the nation's 120,000 to 130,000 centers, or roughly 8 percent, are accredited by Owens' organization, which is the country's largest early-education accreditation agency.

## **Convenience a plus**

Allegheny General Hospital's Center for Children, a North Side day care and preschool program for up to 112 kids from 8 weeks old through kindergarten, was among the nation's first to earn re-accreditation this fall under NAEYC's tougher standards. The center is affiliated with the hospital and run by Watertown, Mass.-based Bright Horizons.

Parents of infants want nurturing, and those with 3- and 4-year-olds ask about educational programs, said director Karen Brown. All parents want convenient and year-round hours, proximity to their jobs and quality care, she said.

It's there that Lena Carson is learning sign language, but her mother acknowledges the main reason she and her husband, Paul, a doctor at AGH, chose the center was that it's near their home and workplaces.

"We definitely needed something convenient, because we're both so busy," she said.

Carson said she's thrilled with the care and education her daughter receives, and is impressed by what she sees older children doing. Those children learn subjects once reserved for much older students, such as speaking Spanish, cooking international foods and recognizing works of world-renowned painters.

Children pick up foreign languages easier than older people, although learning a foreign language isn't as important as developing other critical skills such as creative expression, reasoning, critical thinking and problem solving, Ent said.

"The most important thing is that we concentrate on the developmentally appropriate methods for the age," Ent said.

## **EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS**

Some local early childhood education programs and centers of note:

- Beginning with Books Center for Early Literacy, East Liberty
- Carriage House Children's Center, Squirrel Hill
- Children's Museum of Pittsburgh's pre-K and Head Start classes for Pittsburgh Public Schools students, North Side
- Council of Three Rivers American Indian Centers, Knoxville, Overbrook, Hazelwood and Dorseyville
- Focus on Renewal's Family Foundations Early Head Start, McKees Rocks
- 4 Kids Braddock, Braddock
- Head Start programs operated by the Allegheny Intermediate Unit, 49 locations throughout county outside of Pittsburgh
- The Hill House Association, Hill District
- Jewish Community Center Early Childhood Development Centers, Squirrel Hill and South Hills
- The Learning Tree School/Truxal Center, Greensburg
- Long Run Children's Learning Center, McKeesport
- Masonic Village at Sewickley Child Care Center, Sewickley
- Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre, Polish Hill
- Shady Lane School, Point Breeze

- Programs offered at University of Pittsburgh and Carlow, Duquesne and Carnegie Mellon universities, Oakland and Uptown

- YWCA Homewood Brushton Child Care, Homewood

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