

Gerry Sawrey: Research backs up importance of early years

March 14, 2008 @ 06:30 PM
The Herald-Dispatch

Thanks to recent research in the field of early brain development, what experts in the field of early childhood education have suspected for some time is now affirmed: Young children have a tremendous capacity to learn.

The first five years of life are a time of significant growth in the areas of language, cognition, motor capabilities and social and emotional development, with approximately 90 percent of brain growth taking place before kindergarten. The guidance, support, love and care provided by parents and other adults during these early years are crucial for optimal child development.

However, scientists are finding much more can be done to encourage the growth of thinking and learning skills.

Recent research consistently shows that children who participate in quality educational experiences before entering kindergarten do better academically throughout their school careers and are less likely to be held back in school or be in need of special education.

Research substantiates there are additional benefits to both child and society as children who have had quality preschool experiences as a group have higher high school graduation and college-going rates, have enhanced earning power as adults and are less likely to participate in crime. A study conducted by Marshall University's Center for Business and Economic Research in 2005 concluded that the payoff for investing in early childhood programs is probably higher than that of any other economic development expenditure, yielding \$5.20 in benefits for every dollar invested. Indeed, preschool does matter ... a lot.

Learning in preschool looks very different from learning in elementary school. When you visit a quality preschool classroom, you will observe a room full of children playing and talking. Focusing on the whole child, preschool classrooms provide opportunities to learn through the natural routines of the school day; from the way a classroom is organized to activities and through outdoor play. The most important goals of the preschool curriculum are for children to get along with one another and to become enthusiastic, confident learners. Preschool education supports children as they "learn how to learn." This is a skill that will serve these students well not only during the preschool years, but throughout their lives.

Preschool children learn best in small group settings with an experienced adult who uses each child's interests to build vocabulary, introduce numeracy concepts and reinforce early literacy



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Lead preschool teacher Janna Hardman and assistant teacher Sarah Ross teach students about house pets in the prekindergarten classroom Thursday, Feb. 21, 2008, at Crossroads United Methodist Church Child Care in Huntington.

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skills that are the building blocks for reading.

Children develop independence by learning to follow rules, make friends and demonstrate self control. These important social and emotional skills will enable them to be more successful in school than those children who have not developed them.

In 2002, the West Virginia Legislature mandated that all school districts be able to provide quality preschool programs for all 4-year-olds whose parents wanted to enroll them by the 2012-2013 school year. County school systems, including Cabell County, have been working with community partners who traditionally provided services to 4-year-olds to build the Cabell County WV Pre-K program.

While many of the 40 classrooms are located in elementary schools, our local Pre-K team recognizes that families have a variety of needs. We have worked collaboratively to assure the Pre-K program is also available in many of the area's high-quality child care centers, Head Start programs and private preschools.

Parents enrolling a child in an official Cabell County WV Pre-K Program can be assured that the program meets the high standards set by the West Virginia Board of Education for Pre-K, regardless of where the program is located. These high-quality standards include providing rich learning environments; qualified, certified teachers; a curriculum linked to the county curriculum; instruction of the highest quality that meets the needs of 4-year-olds; and frequent parent contact and involvement resulting in a partnership with the school system that will be sustained over the course of a child's educational journey.

On March 7, all elementary schools in Cabell County were open for Pre-K Application Day as well as Kindergarten Enrollment. Applications for Pre-K may be submitted for children who are 4 years old by Sept. 1, 2008. Should a school receive more of these applications than it has room for students, a drawing will be held to fill the available space. In order to expedite the application process, parents were asked to bring with them a copy of the child's birth certificate, immunization record, social security card and proof of family income to determine Head Start eligibility.

Graham Greene once said, "There is always a moment in a child's life when the door opens and lets the future in." That door for children in Cabell County may just be the door into a Pre-K classroom. We urge parents to turn the knob and walk on in.

Gerry Sawrey is assistant superintendent for the Cabell County Board of Education.

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