

An Ounce of Prevention is Worth a Pound of Cure

I like old proverbs, saws and adages. They usually contain a grain, or sometimes a ton, of truth. If ever one did, it's the fact that an ounce of prevention readying kids for Kindergarten is worth a pound of cure in dealing with what happens after a child enters Kindergarten unable to read or know their numbers or being socially ready. An elementary teacher was quoted in a recent Gazette article saying, "First graders are doing what used to be second grade work and kindergarteners are doing what used to be first grade work." Imagine you're a five year old coming to school for the first time with absolutely no preparation, parents who also have no clue what's needed for their child to be ready for this traumatic experience, and being expected to do school work that is so far beyond your capability that it's impossible to succeed.

So, aside from feeling sorry for children in this predicament, why should you care? For many reasons. A study from Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman shows that every dollar spent on early childhood development can save \$7 to \$10 in the long run. We spend a lot of money for prisons and much of the prison population got there due to a poor start in life. We have a number of non-profits in our community dealing with mental health problems in children and adults, including Abbe, Tanager Place and Four Oaks. Logic tells me that a poor start in school contributed to those with mental and emotional health problems. A great deal of time and thus money is spent by the school district in attempting to get elementary students up to grade level, many of whom started behind the eight ball in kindergarten. Wouldn't it be better for those students, as well as for those who are on target, to spend more time teaching grade level material? We need smart, well educated people to fill the jobs of the future. It's a matter of economic survival for our community, state and nation.

What do we know about the first few years of a child's life? A key piece of knowledge is that 90% of a child's brain is developed by age 5. 700+ new brain connections are formed every second during early childhood. And from watching my 19 month old great granddaughter Mila's development I definitely see all that happening. Those toddlers are a lot smarter than we give them credit for and we need to nurture them as they develop. In Cedar Rapids only 50% of kindergarteners on the Free and Reduced Price Lunch Program are proficient in early literacy skills. Also unfortunately only 72% of their higher-income peers are proficient. Research has shown that in the United States 44 of 50 students who were poor readers at the end of first grade remained poor readers at the end of fourth grade.

I first was exposed to this situation when my good friend Carl Sefl roped me into being involved with the Fifteen In Five Early Childhood initiative that was mounted prior to the 2008 flood. As part of that I moderated 8 focus groups with the parents and grandparents of pre-school children as well as two with preschool providers. Hearing that testimony got me thoroughly invested in the importance of preschool education. Since then I've advocated in various ways and last summer became a member of the Linn County Early Childhood Iowa Governance Board. I've learned a lot in the few months I've been on the board. One, there are a large number of organizations locally, statewide and nationally that are working on ways to improve the lot of pre-school children. Second, Linn County Early Childhood Iowa does an excellent job of disbursing funds to many organizations in Linn County helping young kids and their parents. And third, in spite of these efforts many more children and parents of the 14,000 children age

0 to 5 in Linn County need help to optimize preparation for life. Granted, there are many barriers to achieving this...not enough preschools, the cost to attend them, transportation availability, just no time when you're working two jobs to provide food on the table, increasing numbers of one parent families, to name a few. Fourth, there are even more non-profit organizations, dozens actually, trying to help youth and adults catch up and gain a foothold on a good life, with thousands of dollars donated and spent that would have done a world more good being spent on kids before kindergarten. It's all Band-Aids and fixing at that point, rather than preventing the problems in the first place.

Linn County Early Childhood Iowa Board, along with the other Early Childhood Iowa board across the state, is asking state government to approve improvements to the section of the Iowa Code that governs Early Childhood Iowa operations. The changes simplify language where appropriate, authorizes actions by local boards where it makes sense and serves to make Early Childhood Iowa more efficient. This is very important legislation and everyone is urged to contact their state Senator and Representative to express their support (and your Senator and Representative really do want to hear your opinions).

It is just one man's opinion, but I can think of nothing more important than investing in the preparation of our children to hit the ground running in kindergarten and thus giving them a fair shot at success in the rest of their lives. I urge you to learn more about this whole subject and become as convinced as I am that much more money and effort should be put toward this key to our future.

Submitted by Dan Wiese