

Every child belongs to this community

The Herald-Sun, Sunday, May 29, 2011

By Dwan Jones, Special to The Herald-Sun

As a parent, I am not alone in having high hopes for my child's future. It is in our nature to want to provide everything a child needs -- and most of what they want. Call me optimistic in my role as a new parent, but when I visualize my child's future, I have high expectations -- I see multiple graduation caps, I see a homeowner, and I see happiness, comfort and independence.

That's because seeing the alternative -- an unhappy child -- is depressing. Seeing a child unsuccessful is devastating. If you've ever watched a child lose a game, lose a race, or simply not make the team, you know what I mean. Shift that mental picture of the finish line into a child's high school graduation. That makes it a little more serious, doesn't it? A race is just a race, but a good education sets the stage for all future success.

I think about how many children struggle to participate in school and how some children start their educational journeys far behind others. These children may never catch up. Children need to enter school with a receptive mind, emotional self-control and the ability to follow directions. If our youngest students are weak in these areas, how can we expect them to absorb educational instruction? If a whole classroom isn't moving forward together, every child suffers.

Consider this a community problem. Each high school dropout is one less member of a productive workforce, one less taxpayer, and potentially one more person introduced into the welfare system or a life of crime. In fact, states often use third-grade reading test scores as part of the equation in determining how many jail cells to build.

I don't like to picture prison or teenage parenthood or unemployment as the future for any of our children. It hurts us all.

Any businessperson will tell you that it costs less to prevent a future problem than to fix one that already exists.

Why not invest in children early, nurture their potential before their struggles become insurmountable and they are faced with dropping out of high school or a life of crime to survive? We can pay now or pay much more later.

The early childhood system in Durham has been built to help any parent or caregiver who has concerns about their child's health or development. It also supports families who want to improve their parenting skills, need support with their newborn, have a need to access a child care scholarship or whose children

are getting ready to transition to kindergarten. In addition, it provides support for families whose children have a special need to navigate the early intervention system and it provides training and technical assistance to child care providers to improve the quality of early education.

Durham's Partnership for Children, a Smart Start initiative, is one of the local agencies that works collaboratively within the community to create high-quality supports for Durham County children birth to age 5 and their families. Their work reaches every segment of the community through efforts like the Early Childhood Faith Initiative, in collaboration with End Poverty Durham, and the Transition to Kindergarten initiative, a comprehensive collaborative with Durham Public Schools.

Durham County children and families are in need, and supports are available. Unfortunately, as local needs increase, support and funding for these programs decrease; they are at risk of getting cut to the point of extinction as the state's budget is currently being written. More kids will not be ready for school, not be ready to graduate, and not be able to compete for jobs.

I understand that 90 percent of brain development occurs before age 5 and that existing early childhood programs are helping our children cross the finish line. Our children cannot be successful in school -- and race to the top as graduates -- when so many are not even at the starting line.

The Durham Chamber of Commerce has incorporated early childhood education into its economic development agenda because it recognizes early childhood education as the foundation for prosperity. While failing our children may be a community problem, saving this support system is a community success. Now is the time to contact our legislators and contact Gov. Beverly Perdue.

I am going to let the decision-makers who represent me know just how much I value our community. Join me in speaking up for our children ... our future.

Dwan Jones lives in Durham.