

The cradle of early childhood education

By Angie Welsh, Guest columnist: The Herald-Sun, Wednesday, November 17, 2010

Before your child enters kindergarten, the vast majority of his or her brain development will have already occurred.

While it is astounding to consider that the infrastructure of a 5-year-old's brain is nearing completion, the facts are conclusive. Studies confirm that the first three years of life are when children are learning how to learn, and research tells us that children who are exposed to high-quality early learning will grow up and be more likely to contribute to a competent work force, have a savings account, own a home and are less likely to rely on social services or be involved in criminal activity.

Early childhood advocates in Durham are well aware of the facts. Durham's Partnership for Children, a Smart Start Initiative, and its wide network of early childhood partners have been working for more than 15 years to shape and strengthen the quality of early childhood care and education for children birth to age 5.

Durham and the surrounding community support collaborative approaches to help young children and their families, and monitor common early childhood indicators. These relationships have established Durham as a statewide leader in early childhood education.

At a recent Smart Start Leadership Symposium, Joan Lombardi, the deputy assistant secretary for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, called North Carolina "the cradle of early childhood." North Carolina was the first in the nation to create a statewide early childhood system and the first to establish a quality rating and improvement system -- the star-rated license. Early this year, Governor Beverly Perdue vowed to fight for early childhood education funding through Smart Start as she introduced her "Ready, Set, Go!" Initiative, aimed at the continuum of education from the early years to college and career. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, whose focus is not typically young children, recently released a report that emphasizes the critical need for high-quality early learning opportunities.

And never before has there been such desperately high need for services in the areas of early care and education, health and early intervention, and family support. As funding for programs like Smart Start has declined over the past 10 years by close to 30 percent in Durham, the number of Durham's children birth to age 5 has grown by more than 22 percent. According to census data released last month, nearly a quarter of all North Carolina children are living in poverty. These are the children who could benefit most from early learning.

Our responsibility as a community is clear. Let's continue to invest in Durham's future by giving children what they need. Without our collective commitment to strengthen North Carolina's model system, 15 years of collaborative work might simply vanish. Cutting effective early childhood programs will hurt all of us as we will rely on our children as the next generation of leaders, parents, taxpayers and workers.

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