

# Early to Learn:

## PARTNERS FOR SCHOOL READINESS

### United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania

The United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania has taken the lead in boosting quality early childhood education in the Philadelphia region by pursuing the goal of school readiness. This article describes their research-based approach to strengthening existing services and engaging the child care community in early childhood education, as well as the impact to date of their comprehensive Early to Learn initiative.



United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania has a long history of supporting quality early childhood education. United Way has assisted and supported the region in acquiring public and private support for early childhood education to reach our goal of improving educational outcomes for our most at-risk population, the very young. We know from our research and the research of national organizations, that America is in an educational crisis. Among industrialized nations, the United States ranks 16th in science scores, and 17th in eighth grade math scores. The high school dropout rate among 16 to 24 year olds is 11.2 percent. Pennsylvania ranks 27th in the nation in its high school graduation rate (84.1 percent) and only 61.2 percent of Philadelphia high school students who enter ninth grade graduate after six years. Over half of Philadelphia public school students score in the bottom quarter in standardized math and reading tests.

The role of education in a child's ability to create a healthy, fulfilling life has been well documented. Children who are ready for school do better on a number of key measures, such as school attendance and achievement, social and emotional health, high school graduation and continued participation in higher education. Optimal development during this period provides the best possibility for lifelong success in school and beyond.

### What is school readiness?

Across the country, scientists, educators, academicians, political leaders, business leaders and parents agree that the ability of children to succeed in school requires greater action to support families with young children from birth to the beginning of kindergarten. United Way has adopted the Goals 2000: Educate America Act's definition of school readiness in order to support early childhood programs in our region. The goals of school readiness are:

- **Readiness in children**, including physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, language development, cognition and general knowledge, and approaches to learning;
- **Readiness of schools**, including smooth transition between home and school, continuity between early care programs and elementary school; and
- **Family and community support**, including access to high quality preschool programs for parents to help devote time each day to helping their children learn, and receive the support and training they need to do this.

### What is happening in our region?

Troubled by the prospect of our children failing, and encouraged by the emerging science, United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania, in cooperation with the City of Philadelphia and School District of Philadelphia, took action and commissioned: **The Philadelphia 1000 Family Survey**, a random sample of 1000 families with children under 5; **The Philadelphia Child Care Quality Study**, a study of quality at over 200 centers, Head Starts, and all types of home-based early care and education; and **The Parenting Education and Support Review**, a study of the impact of parenting programs across the nation.

#### *Parents Say Quality Early Care and Education Are Rare*

Sixty-five percent of Philadelphia parents report that affordable high quality child care is difficult to find: Latino, African-American and low-income parents are disproportionately affected. Seventy-five percent of Philadelphia's young children have participated in an early care and education program before entering kindergarten. Thirty-seven percent of children 0-5 attend a center, 35 percent have parental care, 21 percent use relative care and 7 percent use non-relative care. While the individuals who work with young children are sensitive to them, the overall quality needed to support child health and safety as well as school readiness is minimal. Eighteen percent of center-based programs are good, 75 percent are minimally adequate, and 6 percent are inadequate. For family child care, our study found that 4 percent were good, 42 percent were minimally adequate, and 54 percent were inadequate. No program was excellent.

#### *High Cost to Parents, and Funding Is Inadequate*

Programs receive too little money to recruit, pay, and retain qualified professionals and to assure stimulating, caring, learning environments for our youngest children. The average amount that a center receives per preschooler is \$2.35 per hour. The under-funded Philadelphia schools operate with per pupil reimbursements of \$6.27 per hour.

A Philadelphia parent of a preschooler pays an average annual fee of \$5,512 per child, which is 19 percent of median family income. Early education programs seek other sources of funding besides fees, but few are successful. Only 7 percent of early care and education programs raise more than 10 percent of their income from sources other than fees.

#### *Basic Health Resources Are Sufficient, but Health Status of Philadelphia Children Is Far from Ideal*

Lead poisoning and asthma are critical problems. Eleven percent of Philadelphia parents report that their young children have asthma. Sixteen percent of children screened have lead poisoning, which can impair thinking and learning. Experts report an inadequate supply of dentists to serve low-income children. One-third of 3- and 4-year-old Philadelphia children have never seen a dentist.

#### *Limited Effects of Parenting Programs Demand Creative Approaches*

The Parenting Education and Support Review found that parenting programs have a limited effect on parent knowledge about child development; family functioning; children's social, emotional, and cognitive development; school performance; or child safety. The Review found more positive outcomes with the use of professional staff, opportunities for parents to meet in support groups, and targeting of parents who have identified special needs in their children. Use of high-trust, low-stigma settings for parenting support is highly recommended.

### What is United Way doing to meet the school readiness needs of the region?

United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania has created an innovative program called **Early to Learn: Partners for School Readiness** in order to address the findings from our research. Early to Learn focuses on quality education, healthy development of children and parental support to address the crisis of achieving school readiness for young children. This is being accomplished through strengthening the delivery of early childhood services and working with the community to engage parents and professionals.

#### *Strengthening the Delivery of Services to Children:*

Through the *Preschool Plus* program, Early to Learn works with more than 30 preschools serving low-income, multi-ethnic children in the region to raise the quality of the early education experience. Each school receives technical assistance, with a focus on curriculum, child development, literacy, parental support and business operations

Three *Playschools* were created to offer caregivers and young children who do not attend a formal preschool program an enriching educational experience, two

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mornings a week. Teachers model activities using math, science, art, music and early literacy concepts to show caregivers how they can work on school readiness with their children at home.

At Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP)'s *Primary Care Centers*, School Readiness Specialists engage parents on ways to improve their knowledge, skills and confidence in meeting the school readiness needs of their young children.

A comprehensive *Kindergarten-Transition* program is being implemented in collaboration with the School District of Philadelphia to prepare children and families for the child's new school experience.

#### ***Engaging the Community in School Readiness:***

*Parents as Leaders* is an advocacy and leadership training program provided by three community-based organizations in the region. The program encourages parents to become change agents and community leaders in key areas of school readiness such as health, early childhood education, and community involvement.

The *Go2Guide for School Readiness: Resources for Families with Babies, Toddlers and Preschoolers* and the *Social Marketing Campaign* reach out to parents with the message that they are their child's first and most important teacher. The Guide provides parents and professionals with valuable resources that include health care services, early education resources and parenting tips and is accessible in hard copy and online at [www.beehive.org](http://www.beehive.org). The Social Marketing campaign incorporates media and grass-roots outreach to encourage families of young children to "Show. Tell. Read. Sing. Play. Do a little. Every day." with their children. Transit posters and radio spots have been used to spread the message, with a free Fun Activity Book available as a follow-up.

### **What are the results of United Way's work?**

As the program begins its third year, Early to Learn has some preliminary results that show great progress to meeting the goal of successful school readiness.

#### ***Preschool Plus***

- The preschool centers participating in Preschool Plus are showing progress in improving their quality, as measured by the Environmental Ratings Scale, a nationally-validated measurement system. Twenty-four of the twenty-six centers with one-year comparisons available are making great strides towards our goal of providing the 2,914 young children attending these programs with high quality school readiness services.
- The customized School Readiness Improvement Plan (SRIP) is the mechanism through which each preschool center's needs are analyzed and goals are

defined. Ninety-two percent of the identified goals have been met.

- Accreditation is another measure of progress for about half of the participating preschool centers. Four centers are now accredited, including one center that became accredited in this time period. Two centers submitted their paperwork and are awaiting validation.
- A supplemental literacy enrichment program has been implemented in 16 centers to create literacy rich environments. Preschool teaching staff has the opportunity to take college courses to strengthen their teaching skills. Parents are receiving literacy materials to support family reading practices at home.
- Seven Early to Learn sites received technical assistance to allow them to establish relationships with the School District's Pre-K – Head Start project. These centers will receive funding for classroom start-up and they will have the opportunity to offer comprehensive services to 140 unserved Head Start-eligible children.
- Fifty percent of the Early to Learn sites are currently enrolled in the Keystone STARS Initiative. This state-wide program provides funding to centers that demonstrate program quality enhancements or increased professional development opportunities for center staff.

#### ***Playschools***

The children participating in Playschools are making progress on key aspects of school readiness, as demonstrated by the children's:

- awareness that the written letter of the same name also represents the spoken letter of the alphabet.
- ability to name printed letters of the alphabet.
- improvement in oral communication skills, e.g., using words to express their ideas and needs, using complete sentences.
- ability to assemble developmentally appropriate puzzles.
- mastery of patterning, counting and sorting.
- exposure to measurement and classification.

Playschool teachers report that caregivers have a keen interest in the activities that the teachers are providing and ask for additional assistance in equipping their homes for school readiness activities.

#### ***Primary Care Centers***

- The work of the School Readiness Specialists spans the Preschool Plus and Playschool programs, as well as the four primary health care centers at CHOP. At each of these centers, CHOP has successfully upgraded its electronic medical system (EPIC) in order to record a child's developmental milestones; doctors and nurses are partnering with School Readiness Specialists to stimulate parental understanding of

child development and encourage school readiness activities based on the EPIC milestones.

- School Readiness Specialists offer strategies for parents, particularly in improving language and numeracy, as well as qualities that enhance learning, such as curiosity and eagerness.

#### ***Parents as Leaders***

- The graduation of the 9th cohort of Parents as Leaders brings the number of parents trained in advocacy and leadership skills to 84 during the seventeen-month training period.
- Parents are now implementing their leadership projects, ranging from installing stop signs at school crossings to offering parenting courses for incarcerated fathers.

#### ***Kindergarten Transition***

- A Transition Manual was created for teachers and administrators.
- Grassroots events introduce community preschool teachers and kindergarten teachers to each other; an annual Kindergarten Mixer is held at the Please Touch Museum to bring children, parents and kindergarten teachers together.
- Parents are receiving more information about kindergarten enrollment.
- “Buddy” programs have been established between elementary schools and preschools in their neighborhoods — preschool classes are encouraged to visit the local kindergarten classes.
- One-third of the Early to Learn program directors participated in professional development training with the School District of Philadelphia.

#### ***Public Relations and Social Marketing Campaign***

- The Public Relations and Marketing campaign was launched to provide wide exposure to the Early to Learn project.
- The *Go2Guide: Resources for Families with Babies, Toddlers and Preschooler* was designed to address the community’s desire for a one-stop resource tool that provides information on a variety of school readiness topics. Fifteen thousand copies of the guide were made available to families with young children and community service providers. The *Go2Guide* was incorporated into the Beehive [www.beehive.org](http://www.beehive.org) and averages 70,000 hits a month.
- Three posters and car cards for transit were designed to reach out to low-income parents in the African-American and Latino communities and three radio spots were developed.
- More than 7,000 Fun Activity books have been distributed.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

Early to Learn is making great strides in improving the services available to young children and their families. This United Way initiative will continue to build support and help the community define school readiness to prepare children for success in school and in life.

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