



AURORA LAUNCHES NEW EFFORT TO FUND PRE-KINDERGARTEN EDUCATION

BY ERIKA WURST

ewurst@stmedianetwork.com

Most of the discussions about education focus on high school and college diplomas. But the key to schooling success may start much earlier: Children who are behind when they start kindergarten are less likely to graduate from high school or go to college, more likely to end up as teen mothers, or commit violent crimes.

So some dialogue in the educational community has shifted to how to make sure kids get as much early childhood education as possible.

On Tuesday morning, educators, residents, foundation representatives and dozens of others invested in the future of Aurora's youngest learners met at Aurora University to discuss the challenge facing Aurora.

According to Fox Valley United Way CEO Mike Meyer, it is up to community leaders to band together to see that essential programs are provided. Doing so will have social and economic implications that will last for decades, Meyer said during a strategic planning summit to launch Aurora's first Early Learning Council.

As part of the United Way's Suc-



Nicholas Trujillo points to the letters in the word September for his teacher Jamie Glass during class at the Todd Early Childhood Center in Aurora. Next to Trujillo is classmate Max Lopez. | FILE PHOTO

cess by Six initiative, Meyer is determined to bring community activists and educators together to create an early learning environment that caters to all of Aurora's children, starting at birth.

"Hopefully working together we can create a community of the future where all children have the opportunity to succeed at life," Meyer said.

Problems begin at birth

According to statistics presented Tuesday, 20 percent of children younger than 5 in Aurora were born into poverty, and half of all kids live in low-income households. More than half of the city's 3,000 at-risk 3- and 4-year-olds are waiting on early education services that will never be

provided. This means that the majority of Aurora's children are at-risk learners from birth.

Theresa Hawley, project director at Educare of West DuPage, highlighted the importance of early intervention.

"Many social problems have roots in early childhood," she said. "Ages 3 to 5 is when the (learning) explosion happens. We are not investing in education until children are 5 years old. That is long past the window of opportunity."

Statistics show that less than \$2,000 in public funds are spent per pupil on education for children ages 3 and 4. The rate is more than \$10,000 per student in grades K-12.

This remains true despite the fact that early learning programs have a 12 percent return on investment over the years, Hawley said.

Economist James Heckman, a Nobel laureate, has shown that investments in programs that focus on infants and toddlers have the highest potential return of any programs focused on disadvantaged people.

Early learning leads to a better workforce, which leads to a better community. It is important to invest

SEE EDUCATION, PAGE 31

EDUCATION |

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

in the city's children from day one, Hawley said.

Meyer is aware of this as well.

"The achievement gap starts way before school does," he said.

In the East and West Aurora school districts, this statistic is clear. More than one-quarter of East and West Aurora students will not graduate from high school. More than half of third-graders in these districts fail to meet criteria of the Illinois Standards Achievement Test.

"We all sit here and know (early childhood education) is a good idea, we know that it is important," said State Sen. Linda Holmes, an Aurora Democrat. "The question remains: What is the city going to do about this knowledge?"

Creating momentum

Working together to create an Aurora Early Learning Council is one way community leaders anticipate

tackling the problem.

The initiative, which Hawley estimates will cost between \$300,000 to \$550,000 to keep going, is crucial to bringing public and private community bodies on board.

"We have a very talented community," said West Aurora Superintendent Jim Rydland. "We should be leading (the way in early childhood education), not following behind. It is our failure for not getting us all in the same room together earlier."

"This can't be about everyone sitting around just talking about the issues," Rydland said. "By doing that, we won't get anywhere."

Over the next three to six months, the group of leaders plans to put together an outline to create awareness about early learning issues, draft a plan to solicit money to help fund the Early Learning Council, and create a case for support by local public and private investors.

"Change is slow, and change is hard," Hawley said.