

Education News & Notes

A Smart Approach To Early Education

by Gregory Taylor

(NAPSA)—Every year, 4 million American children enter kindergarten for the first time. Imagine the chaos if, on that bright and shining opening day, one in three children were turned away at the door.

No parent or educator would stand for such a scenario. But in fact, every year, as many as one-third of American children enter a kindergarten class



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unprepared to learn, and many will never catch up. That all-important door is already, in effect, closed. The reasons for this are complex,

but this much is clear: The multiple systems—from family to schools to government—that should be supporting young children too often are failing to do so.

That failure is costing our children and costing America. There is hope, however. Expert research suggests that investing in early learning is the best investment we can make in America's future.

Studies by the Institute of Medicine, the National Research Council and others tell us that the achievement gap for poor and otherwise disadvantaged children is created in the first five years of their lives. A youngster's brain works on a "use it or lose it" principle, and synapses not used or stimulated early on will be discarded.

The child's first five years at home thus constitute the most important years of his or her life. The first four years in school are the second most important phase. And the transition from home to

school may be the most important transition in his or her life.

But in most school districts there is little if any interaction between local child care centers, early care and education providers and the public school system. Transitions to kindergarten usually consist of a "meet and greet" session for parents. Rarely is there an alignment of teaching or curriculum or coordination of teachers and parents.

Fortunately, that situation is beginning to change. In 2006, early childhood education was named a legislative priority by 24 governors, compared to 17 in 2005. Some states such as Washington have created new departments dedicated to early learning.

To support states' efforts, many national foundations (including the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's SPARK initiative—Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids), as well as researchers in academia and the federal government, have launched system-building initiatives that link parents, educators, early childhood service providers and their communities.

A big part of this community-based, innovative thinking is the movement toward ready schools. In communities as diverse as Miami, Florida and Gwinnett County, Georgia, where SPARK has made investments, we are beginning to see positive change.

In early 2007, the Gwinnett County Public Schools (the largest school district in Georgia and the 20th largest in the country) adopted and funded the SPARK Georgia school transition model. Using federal Title I funds to implement, the nationally recog-

nized Parents as Teachers program has resulted in increases in key school-readiness skills; greater parent participation and leadership in early education and schools; and parent attendance at GED and ESL classes.

In Miami, our initiative identified a lack of alignment in expectations between elementary schools and child care facilities. Support for an increase in the number of accredited centers led eventually to success in creating a quality rating system that further aligns expectations across early education and the early grades and includes criteria for those all-important transitions.

In the past, the burden was primarily on children and parents to get ready for school. But this "two-way street" approach helps shape schools so they are prepared to receive and serve all children.

By focusing on the crucial learning period from birth up to the early grades we can also help ensure the success of existing programs such as No Child Left Behind, currently up for reauthorization by Congress. Policymakers at all levels should continue to provide tools and flexibility to nurture such community-based innovations.

If we fail to act, the schoolhouse door will remain shut for millions of children—and the cost to every American will be incalculable.

• *Gregory Taylor is vice president for programs for youth and education at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. In March 2007, he testified before a U.S. Senate Committee on Finance hearing on "Realizing a Competitive Education: Identifying Needs, Partnerships and Resources."*