

EVANSTON ROUNDTABLE

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'Does Early Childhood Education Really Matter?'

By Larry Gavin

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Evanston is doing “exciting things” in early childhood development. There is “huge momentum.”

That is the message conveyed by Terese Eckrich Sommer, Ph.D., senior research scientist at the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University and a board member of Evanston Childcare Network (CNE); Andrea Densham, executive director of CNE; and Sara Schastok, president and CEO of Evanston Community Foundation (ECF) to a group of early childhood providers, School Board members and administrators, and other interested persons at a forum titled “Does Early Childhood Really Matter?” on Feb. 24.



Left to right, Terri Sabol, Terese Eckrich Sommer, Andrea Densham and Sara Schastok. Photo by Evanston Photographic Studios

Evanston’s early childhood providers are continuing to focus on the birth-to-3 age group and on improving the quality of early childhood services across the board. In addition, Dr. Sommer highlighted three new initiatives: Little and Learning, a Two Generational Program, and the Cradle to Career initiative.

Birth to Age 3

The nation and the state are increasing their focus on children ages birth to 3. Dr. Sommer said the federal government has restored about \$400 million in funding to Head Start and certain early learning programs that had been lost due to sequestration. In addition, the government has allocated an additional \$620 million in new dollars to Head Start, one-half of which is for the very youngest children, 0-3 years old, she said.

In his State of the State address on Jan. 29, Gov. Pat Quinn announced a “Birth to Five Initiative,” that includes prenatal services. In announcing the initiative, he said, “When the human brain is forming early in a child’s life, it provides a critical window of opportunity to develop key academic, social and cognitive skills that will determine success in school and in life.”

“Evanston has taken a lead” in focusing on the birth-to-3 age group, said Ms. Schastok.

For the last 10 years, CNE has provided Early Head Start services. It partners with early childhood providers to enhance the physical, social, emotional and intellectual development of children from birth to 3 years old and to educate and empower their parents.

In 2007, ECF began funding a research-based home-visit program for 50 families with children in the birth-to-3 age group in Evanston. Its primary partners are the Infant Welfare Society and the Family Center at School District 65. When it started, ECF's program increased the number of Evanston families receiving home visits by about one-third, said Ms. Schastok.

Ms. Schastok said on a statewide basis, 7.1% of families who could benefit from home visits have that opportunity. In Evanston, the percentage is 40 – 50%.

Quality Programming

Dr. Sommer said CNE would apply this spring for state and federal funds to increase the quality of all early learning programs. “There are different funding streams and different kinds of early education opportunities provided here in our community, and the idea is to raise the standards for all of them by bringing in a rich kind of curriculum that Teri [Sabol] has mentioned, the professional development, the evaluation tools, and the support to the families beyond just the children themselves.”

Dr. Sommer gave several examples. She and Dr. Sabol are working closely with CNE to find ways to bring in a new math curriculum to the early-learning community and to figure how that connects with District 65 math initiatives. “We do know that the fundamental math skills are critical in not only children's early learning, but their continuing learning,” she said.

Another example is the “Learning Together” program, in which CNE brings in mental health consultants to work with teachers whose young students have behavioral or emotional issues. The consultants help teachers “model how they interact with most challenging children and provide ongoing professional development,” said Dr. Sommer. “There's an improved environment, not only for that child having difficulty, but for all children in that classroom.”

Another focus will be to coordinate what is taught in pre-school programs with District 65's curriculum, said Ms. Densham. “The notion of moving all the way through the entrance into kindergarten with a good partnership and a solid bridge that's really informed and thoughtfully designed is critically important.”

New Initiatives

Little and Learning: The Little and Learning committee evolved from Evanston 150. One of the main ideas is to identify children who have no early learning exposure and help them get to the right program and services, said Dr. Sommer. Little and Learning, CNE and ECF are also planning to develop a scholarship fund to assist families who do not qualify for the State's childcare subsidy to attend a quality childcare program.

Two-Generational Program: The Two-Generational Program is a collaboration between Aspen Institute, NU's Institute for Policy and Research and ECF, said Dr. Sommer. The pilot simultaneously provides high-quality early education for children as well as education, job training and employment opportunities for their parents.

Dr. Sommers said the program was launched last week with 12 mothers, who are participants in a home-visiting program or whose children were in Head Start. The goal is to enable these mothers “to take the time to really invest in their own education and their careers and to think beyond what's needed today, but what do they want for their families tomorrow,” said Dr. Sommers.

“Without a strong and settled family, our children are going to continue to struggle,” said Ms. Densham. “It's only when we do it in a two-generational way that we're going to really achieve the anti-poverty objectives that I think we all know early childhood services can provide. That is, we help the child and we help the

family.”

Cradle to Career: The Cradle to Career initiative unveiled in December focuses on children’s “holistic development,” said Dr. Sommer. In the initiative, many organizations in Evanston will work together to collectively make an impact. The vision is that by age 23 that all Evanston youth will be leading productive lives.

“It’s really about having us working together as a community and invest in not just our particularly focused area, like early learning or high school students, but rather see that everything we do is committed to what everyone else here is doing and take collective responsibility for that,” said Dr. Sommer.

“We’re hoping to be able to leverage our community resources together to build collaborative action, collective impact and to do it in a way that ensures equity for all of our children,” said Ms. Densham.

What the Data Shows About Early Education

At the Feb. 25 forum, Terri J. Sabol, Ph.D., adjunct faculty member, School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University, stepped into the national debate on whether early childhood education matters. Some say early education has both short and long-term positive impacts. Others say it is waste of money.

“All of it can make your head spin in trying to unpack who is actually telling the truth and what is the evidence on early childhood education,” said Dr. Sabol. She discussed a number of studies that have been cited in the media.

An important study for those who say early childhood education matters is a study of the Perry Preschool Program that served 120 kids in the early 1960s. Dr. Sabol said the study found that 67% of the kids in the program were ready for school, compared to 28% in the control group; 49% were proficient at age 14, compared to 15% in the control group; 77% graduated from high school, compared to 60% in the control group. At age 40, 60% of the persons who had attended Perry Preschool earned more than \$20,000 per year, compared to 40% of the control group; 30% were arrested five times or more; compared to 50% in the control group.

“There was a great return on investment,” said Dr. Sabol. “For every dollar you spend in early childhood education, you get a much greater return to your investment compared to investing in later years.”

In a more recent study of 2,700 children who attended pre-K programs in Oklahoma, researchers found that “Children who went to pre-K had about nine months of gain [in pre-reading skills] compared to children who did not attend pre-K,” said Dr. Sabol. The gains were slightly less for spelling and for math.

On the other side of the scale is a study of the Head Start program involving 4,000 kids. The study found small gains at ages 3 and 4, and the effects began to disappear at kindergarten and above. This study has been cited by those who are critical of early childhood programs.

Dr. Sabol said one controversial issue with the study of the Head Start program is the “control group.” She said about 60% of the kids in the control group enrolled in a different Head Start program, a center-based early childhood program, or another child care program. The study was thus not a comparison between Head Start students and students who received no early childhood education, but between Head Start students and another group of students, a high percentage of whom received early childhood services in a different program or at a different location.

Dr. Sabol referred to a report, “Investing in Our Future: The Evidence Base on Preschool Education.” The

report said a recent study of 84 preschool programs found that, on average, children in early education programs gained about one-third of a year of additional learning across language, reading and math skills. Preschool programs in Tulsa and Boston produced larger gains of between a half and a full year of additional learning in reading and math.

“I think there really is strong evidence on the importance of early childhood education,” said Dr. Sabol. “For the most part we’re seeing pretty large gains in terms of children who attend early childhood programs and those who don’t. And there’s emerging evidence on features and qualities that matter for young children.”

One thing she mentioned was the quality of teacher interactions with students, which she said “at the end of the day is what’s driving development.” Another thing she mentioned is a research-based intervention designed to facilitate mathematical learning during ages 3 to 5 years.

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