

“Parent’s are a child’s first and best teacher...”

“... we can no longer allow children to enter school unprepared to learn and to succeed.”

CLOSING CHILDREN’S ACHIEVEMENT GAP BEFORE IT STARTS

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It’s well-known that many children in our community come into the education system at a distinct disadvantage. By the time they are 3 years old, high-income children have a vocabulary of more than 1,110 words, while very low-income children possess only about 500 words. This sets these children on a path to lower academic achievement, increasing their chances of being placed in special education, being held back a grade and even of dropping out of school entirely.

The solution to this challenge is also well-known. Early-childhood education builds important pre-literacy and early math skills and fosters children’s love of learning by encouraging exploration. It also helps kids develop social skills such as cooperating, making friends and accepting new responsibilities.

If we don’t allow children to start off at a disadvantage, we won’t ever have to close achievement gaps, those pernicious gulfs between low-income children and their better-off peers, and between African American and Hispanic students and their white and

Asian counterparts. That’s why the First 5 Commission of San Diego has contracted with the San Diego County Office of Education to operate the Quality Preschool Initiative (QPI).

QPI seeks to increase the quality of existing early education programs, ultimately reducing the school readiness gap and improving school achievement in San Diego County by providing children and their parents with the kind of early education they need to do well in school and beyond.

Funded through a \$55 million, three-year contract from First 5 San Diego, QPI provides high-quality preschool at no cost to about 10,000 students in 12 high-need communities: Borrego Springs, Central San Diego, Chula Vista, El Cajon, Escondido, Lemon Grove, Mountain Empire, National City, San Ysidro, South Bay, Valley Center/Pauma and Vista. QPI programs are in school sites, family care centers, faith-based locations and child care centers to meet the various needs of families.

The program provides much more than just a direct preschool subsidy to families and organizations that deliver early education services. Research

shows that high-quality early-childhood education can help close the achievement gap and get our children ready to learn and succeed in school and in life, but the key is “high-quality.” QPI builds the capacity of preschool programs, so the school can educate all of its future students more effectively. The initiative provides preschool operators the tools they need to improve quality for children such as: external reviews to evaluate program environment,

teaching practices and safety; customized coaching support; and screening of children for special needs and referral to services as needed.

Of course, it’s not up to schools alone to ensure students are ready to learn. Parents are a child’s first and best teacher; studies show that one predictor of a student’s achievement in school is the extent to which families create a home environment in which learning is valued and parents are involved in their children’s education. QPI supports that

role by engaging parents, grandparents and caretakers in their children’s learning as partners. Parents at QPI preschools are encouraged and provided opportunities to volunteer in the classroom, and are offered parenting, nutrition and other classes. The goal is to give parents tips they can use immediately at home, to help build the foundation for success for both parents and students that will continue throughout their school education.

Aside from parents, preschool teachers play the most important role in preparing a child for school. They possess the academic and experiential requirements needed to guide developmentally appropriate and meaningful early learning experiences. Teachers also serve as key contacts within a preschool agency to implement quality improvements within the classroom. QPI has implemented a unique teacher stipend system focused on encouraging professional growth by providing a financial incen-

tive to grow professionally.

Programs like QPI are a smart investment; economists have found that quality early learning offers one of the highest returns of any public investment – more than \$7 for every dollar spent. After all, the cost to provide a child with a year of quality preschool is \$4,600, compared to an annual cost of \$47,000 to incarcerate a person in California.

By not making early-childhood education a priority, we are jeopardizing our own

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future. In a globally competitive workforce, we can no longer allow children to enter school unprepared to learn and to succeed. Thankfully here in San Diego, we are doing something about that. The Quality Preschool Initiative is a powerful step forward in preparing children to succeed in school and contribute to a strong economy and a thriving community.

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