

Quality early learning helps start youth on correct path

By Chester Harhut (Guest Columnist)

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For 17 of my 26 years as a Common Pleas Judge in Lackawanna County, I presided over family cases of all types, including juvenile delinquency, truancy, and dependency (child neglect and abuse). The appearance of a child and family in the courtroom is a strong signal that something went wrong in school or in the home. I know from experience that everyone – child, parents, family, society – would have been better served if the court appearance could have been avoided entirely.

For this reason, I support investments in high-quality early childhood education. The problems I see are rooted in the child's failure in school and the parent's failure to provide guidance. Quality early learning helps replace dysfunction with stability and structure, equipping young people to learn and succeed.

From birth to age 5, the brains of young children are growing rapidly, developing 700 neural synapses per second to form capabilities for learning. However, during this same period, we see differences in children's exposure to learning concepts. Based on years of research, it has been documented that children from college-educated families accumulate vocabularies of over 1,000 words by age 3. Children whose families live in poverty have vocabularies of only 500 words.

Plus, the seeds of socialization are sown in these years. This is the time when 90 percent of our capabilities for communications, critical thinking, teamwork, and problem solving are built, according to Harvard University.

Decades of research show that quality early childhood education, filled with structured learning and stimulation, helps children enter school ready to learn. They are more likely to graduate from high school, pursue college or career training, obtain good jobs, and become productive, contributing members of society.

On the opposite side, disadvantaged children without quality early learning enter school 12 to 18 months developmentally behind their peers. Failure to catch up can be disastrous. Out of 50 who struggle to read in first grade, 44 will still be struggling in fourth grade. If they're well below grade level in fourth grade, many will not graduate from high school.

Long-term studies show that disadvantaged children who didn't experience high-quality early childhood programs have higher rates of substance abuse and involvement with the criminal justice system. Compared to their peers who attended high-quality programs, they are 70 percent more likely to be arrested for violent crimes by age 18.

Many times, I've dealt with truant teens who followed similar paths to my door. They started school behind their peers in academic ability and in socialization. They struggled to catch up. Many may have been innately smart, but they never had the opportunity to show it. They couldn't keep up, so they didn't enjoy school, leading to truancy and dropping out.

Quality early learning prepares a child, as early as possible, to meet the challenges of school, so they'll be able to keep up socially, physically, and mentally. They know how to meet challenges and stick with them.

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I also see delinquency issues among youth, often caused by a lack of guidance from parents. If we help the most distressed children as early as possible, the numbers would show a radical shift in later years, before they get involved with the court system and face incarceration.

I am absolutely convinced that unless we look at prevention, the situation in our courts, juvenile systems, and dependency systems will worsen. High-quality early childhood education gives children the tools to learn despite the barriers they face and provides parents with the tools to educate their children – not so much with the ABCs, but with the critical life skills of persistence and socialization.

By investing in quality early childhood education now, we can break the cycle of poverty and violence. The earlier, the better, and the more we save in the long run. I support investments for early childhood education and agree that more children at risk of failing school should have the opportunity to be served through high-quality early learning programs.

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