



Viewpoint: Early learning in Berks needs more support

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By Carey Harris

Few investments matter more than investing in a young child's future, especially when that child is growing up in poverty.

While high-quality early learning programs have been shown to yield higher dividends than the stock market, failure to make those investments has high costs to individuals, families and society.

In its "Program Reach and Risk Assessment Fiscal Year 2014-2015" report, the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning affirmed that about 16,300 children in Berks County face a moderate high risk of school failure because of poverty factors beyond their control.

Approximately 5,000 of these young children are participating in high quality, publicly supported programs that help mitigate these risks. Unfortunately, more than 11,000 of the county's very young, low-income children are not being served.

Here is an overview of what's happening in Berks:

Programs such as Home Visiting and Family Support start at the beginning, during pregnancy and through the first two years. Not only has this type of early intervention been shown to strengthen families, it has been proved to positively impact grades and achievement in school. Last year, the Community Prevention Partnership of Berks County and the Berks County Intermediate Unit provided these types of services to 699 children under age 2.

When developmental delays affecting speech, physical movement and cognition are recognized early, and appropriate assistance is provided, children are better able to overcome the delays and succeed in school. Last year, the BCIU provided early intervention services to 3,065 children under 5.

High-quality child care programs offer safe, nurturing and stimulating environments to young children while also allowing their parents time to work and/or pursue an education or job training. Berks is home to 167 licensed child care centers.

When looking for quality child care, families can reach for the Stars: Pennsylvania's Keystone Stars program was created to help families find high-quality programs and help programs improve their quality. Participants can earn a Star 1 to 4 rating by meeting certain benchmarks for teacher qualifications, learning environment, family involvement and management. Although 75 percent of Berks child care providers participate in this voluntary system, only 20 percent have earned a high-quality Star 3 or 4 ranking.



Financial help is available to low-income families who need assistance paying for child care services, whether they are provided by a relative who has met certification requirements, a home-based program or a center. Although about 2,000 Berks children under 5 received financial aid, many more are in need.

Preschool helps encourage a love of learning, sparks curiosity and teaches important social and emotional skills in 3- and 4-year-olds getting ready for their formal K-12 schooling. Pennsylvania's PreK Counts program supports low-income children attending high-quality programs. Unfortunately, with less than 5 percent of eligible children getting the proper support, the county is one of the most underserved areas in the state.

Together, these programs are reaching 32 percent of eligible young children, leaving 68 percent, or more than 11,000 low income children, without needed services.

Although many in Berks are actively involved in engaging at-risk families in early learning to ensure that all of our children have an equal opportunity to succeed in school, and ultimately in life, there is still much more that can be done. Think about it: More than 64 percent of Berks County children under 5 live in poverty and therefore qualify for many early learning services. Yet only 7.9 percent receive financial support for child care; only 12.2 percent participate in Head Start, a federal early learning program; and only 3.3 percent of eligible 3- and 4-year-olds participate in publicly supported preschool programs. Think about this as well: Only 20 percent of the county's early learning providers are high quality.

Clearly, there are thousands of young children in Berks County who are being underserved or simply not receiving any services at all.

As is often the case, lack of adequate financial investment is part of the problem. Even though state spending in early learning under Gov. Tom Wolf has increased by \$60 million, the need and demand for services outweighs what is available.

PA Early Learning Investment Commission and Berks Early Learning Coalition Co-Chairwoman Julia Klein said: "We need to find the will and the way to do more for our youngest children so that we can interrupt the vicious cycle of poverty that afflicts our communities. This is a societal and business imperative."

Despite the challenges, many, including advocates such as the Berks Early Learning Coalition, are committed to helping children and families in Berks County. For more information on how you can get involved in supporting early learning, contact us at belc@berksiu.org.

Carey Harris is the newly appointed executive director of the Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission. Harris provides leadership recruiting business, civic and educational leaders from across the commonwealth to support investment in early childhood initiatives and the formation and successful implementation of public-private partnerships across program sectors.