

Press Clippings 8/19/2018

---Courier News--- 8/19/18

Numbers on school readiness sobering

Elgin-area preschool advocates react to state data on kindergartners

BY RAFAEL GUERRERO

State data released last week on Illinois students' preparedness for kindergarten were sobering for early childhood educators across the state. And that was no different in the Elgin area, where the numbers were especially stark.

About 1 in 4 students statewide were categorized as prepared for kindergarten, according to Illinois State Board of Education data. In **School District U46**, 1 in 10 kindergartners were categorized as prepared, having met benchmarks in all three developmental areas determining readiness, the data showed.

The state board's Kindergarten Individual Development Survey required kindergarten teachers last fall to observe and evaluate their students based on 14 academic measures in social and emotional development, language and literacy development, and math.

The news surprised several Elgin-area early childhood educators and advocates who work indirectly with or separately from the public school systems.

Karen Romano, director of early learning at Elgin's Summit School, described the survey results as complicated.

"Some of the news surprised me because we've been (doing preschool) for a while, but some of it doesn't because we know not all students can be reached," Romano said.

In St. Charles School District 303, 19 percent of kindergartners were meeting benchmarks in all three developmental areas, according to the data. In neighboring School District 300, 31 percent of students were ready in all three areas.

For the survey, teachers were to determine how the students were doing in social interaction with peers and adults, playtime, letter and word knowledge, communication and conversation skills, number and shape recognition, and other criteria.

Supporters of early childhood education viewed the results as a learning experience and said they are determined to improve results and increase preschool access.

For instance, Summit School provides free preschool for 130 students in three classrooms, Romano said. Its current enrollment is a substantial increase from a year earlier, when it had between 85 and 95 children. Romano said she is fortunate the state provided additional funding to add a third preschool class.

"Obviously we could do better, but we need more funding from the state," Romano said.

"The cost of providing prekindergarten now actually saves us all money in the future," she added, a sentiment echoed by other groups in the Elgin area.

The Alignment Collaborative for Education has made early childhood education one of its priorities to better the future workforce of Elgin. The U46-area nonprofit is a collection of community, business and nonprofit leaders working with U46 to boost early childhood education access.

“Long term, (kindergarten readiness) is a workforce development issue,” said Nancy Coleman, the collaborative’s executive director.

A decade ago, chambers of commerce were not talking preschool or early childhood, Coleman said. Today, the number and variety of interested groups and businesses is changing.

Coleman said resources — whether state funding, partnerships or other solutions — must increase for the youngest students. Early childhood access remains inconsistent by state, city and neighborhood.

“This is not a reflection on the school districts. This is about getting the resources to the children before they reach school age,” Coleman said.

“Be careful about getting all negative on this news. It takes time,” she said, noting this is only the first year of data readily available on kindergarten readiness.

Francesca Hantgos, center supervisor of one of the three Head Start prekindergarten education locations in Elgin, said she was surprised with the KIDS results but defended her staff’s abilities. Head Start educators build on their children’s social and emotional learning, assess them on various skills and take them on field trips to give them experiences they may not get at home.

“Students that go to Head Start, they are more successful. We work for the whole child. We work on life skills. We teach them how to be independent,” she said.

Hantgos expressed optimism for the future, noting their preschool programs for 3- to 5-year-olds is expanding from half-day to full-day.

Jan Monell, the early childhood supervisor of The Centre of Elgin’s preschool programs, said “there’s no easy answer” in determining how prepared a 5-year-old may be for kindergarten. They may excel in one or two facets of their development but struggle somewhere else.

Furthermore, times have changed, she said. Monell said technology and smartphones, tablets and game consoles will factor into a child’s development. The KIDS results may not reflect this reality, she said.

“They’re not using their language skills by just being an observer on a tablet or smartphone,” Monell said. “I just think parents need to understand they do need to expose their children to as many experiences as they can. You can turn a trip to the grocery store into a learning experience: What color is this produce? What shape is this? Starting really early does help. And, of course, less screen time and more social time.”

Elgin Community College professor Dawn Munson also weighed in on the results, saying she was “not surprised.” The education professor is the coordinator of the college’s Alliance for Kindergarten Readiness initiative.

The project in the past two years has connected preschool and kindergarten teachers in ECC's coverage area in order to facilitate the conversation on how to better improve preschoolers' transition and success in kindergarten.

"Although the (kindergarten readiness) gap is narrowing, a poverty gap still exists. We need to focus on equity in our schools," she said.

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U46 teacher a semifinalist in teaching contest

BY ELGIN NEWS DIGEST

Matt Erbach, a precision manufacturing teacher at **School District U46's** Streamwood High School, is one of 52 teachers nationwide named semifinalists in the Harbor Freight Tools for Schools 2018 Prize for Teaching Excellence.

Erbach is in the running for a share of \$1 million in cash prizes.

He was chosen from more than 500 skilled-trades teachers who applied for the prize. The semifinalists are from 27 states and specialize in trades such as construction, carpentry, automotive repair, welding and advanced manufacturing.

The list will be narrowed to 18 first- and second-place winners, who will split \$1 million in cash, with 70 percent of the prize money going toward their high school program and 30 percent going to the teacher or teacher team. Winners are expected to be announced Nov. 15.

Erbach has taught precision manufacturing at **Streamwood High School** for 12 years after working for five years in the manufacturing, carpentry and commercial construction trades.