

The Baltimore Sun Gregory Kane column: Preschool lessons are leg up on life

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By Gregory Kane

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Earlier this week, state schools Superintendent Nancy S. Grasmick was in Baltimore to tout new preschool curricula for child care centers, Head Start programs and nursery schools throughout Maryland. The week before, Grasmick and Rep. Steny Hoyer handed out awards to two counties for their work in promoting early childhood education.

What's with the emphasis on educating tykes before they even reach kindergarten? Grasmick was very blunt about it when she proposed an idea that might seem so radical that it will never happen.

"If I had my way," Grasmick said Wednesday, "I'd do away with the senior year of high school and invest the money in early childhood education."

That whooping and cheering you just heard came from every rising high-school senior across the state. Grasmick's idea may seem far-fetched, but she feels her reasoning is sound.

"If we're going to lick some of our academic challenges," Grasmick said, "it will be with early childhood education efforts."

I've talked to educators who wouldn't dispute Grasmick's assertion. More than one teacher or principal has told me they're seeing more and more children who're not prepared for kindergarten. Some may think it's odd that 5-year-olds should be "prepared" for kindergarten. Nancy E. Newman has a problem with the phrase, but she knows what it means.

Newman is the director of The Ark Preschool Learning Center, where Grasmick appeared Monday to announce those curricula the Maryland State Department of Education was recommending for preschool programs. Newman said that children entering kindergarten should know certain things: colors; shapes; counting; number and letter recognition; how to use books; social skills like sitting quietly and attentively and responding to adults other than their parents; and basic vocabulary.

That last one is especially important, because it's through vocabulary that children learn to read. Without sufficient vocabulary, they fall behind in reading. And once kids get behind, educators have told me, it's hard to catch up.

Yesterday Newman scrunched herself into one of the little kiddie chairs at The Ark -- located in the 1200 block of E. Fayette St. -- and showed me how important vocabulary skills are for the center's 3- to 5-year-old students, and how deficient some of them are when they arrive.

After showing me pictures of a cup, bowl, plate, spoon, fork and knife, Newman said, "A lot of our kids can't tell us what these items are. We've had kids come through here headed to kindergarten and they don't know their colors. Our kids are language-delayed, because their parents are focused on other matters."

Those "other matters" might be finding jobs and housing or licking a drug or alcohol problem, Newman said. The Ark is "a short-term, emergency preschool for homeless children and children of those in early recovery from addiction."

Think of where those children would be, if they didn't have a learning center like The Ark to teach them basic academic skills. Think of the ones who never find it to places like The Ark. You have kids who fail academically, drop out of school and then turn to crime.

In other words, you have pretty much the situation we have in Baltimore.

That's what's behind the emphasis on educating tykes before they get to kindergarten. Investing in a child's education on the front end may save us a ton of trouble on the back end.

"I worry most about the children who come from circumstances of academic hardship," Grasmick said. She wants children like the ones who attend The Ark to "have access to high-quality programs" like the ones in affluent suburbs.

The six state-recommended curricula are designed to give child care and nursery schools those high-quality programs. Grasmick was impressed by the development of students at The Ark during her visit Monday.

"Those children knew their colors," Grasmick said. "Their vocabulary was expanded. They could tell you the activity they were doing and why they were doing it."

Grasmick is equally impressed with the state's 24 Judy Centers, early child care and family education centers named for Hoyer's late wife, Judith P. Hoyer, who herself was an early childhood teacher. Grasmick said MSDE data show that the number of Maryland children who enter kindergarten ready to learn has jumped from about 50 percent to 68 percent.

"We think these Judy Centers are contributing greatly to these children coming to school ready to learn," Grasmick said. Hoyer agreed.

"Every place I go where anybody has any relationship with a Judy Center," Hoyer said, "they tell me how effective they are. Clearly they are models that work."

In May, Hoyer co-sponsored with Nebraska Sen. Ben Nelson a bill that would provide \$200 million in federal money to full-service community schools like the Judy Centers and other such "models that work." Hoyer acknowledges it's not much dough to split up among 50 states.

"But significant enough, we hope," the congressman pointed out, "to encourage people to pursue this."

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