

Success by Six jumpstarts learning for youngest students

Jessica Noll-Korczyk | Tuesday, February 26, 2013

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Tiny chatter and tremendous energy fills Miss Elizabeth's preschool class at James E. Biggs Early Childhood Education Center. Giggles and shuffling feet from one side of the classroom to the other exude the predictable exuberance, but in this case, they also signal something more—intensive learning.

Logan, a 5-year-old blonde in a gray shirt and jeans, sits with his friend, Jermaine. With legs crossed and shy smiles, they stack wooden blocks as high as they can, only to knock them down with toy cars and trucks and let out whooping laughs as the blocks tumble to the soft carpet.

Next to them, a sign reads: "I can construct block shapes using examples and illustrations provided and draw a picture of what I built." It's their "I can" statement, which is posted at each learning station inside the classroom. The stations feature puzzles, writing exercises, a sensory table, a library, science, art, a Play-Doh table, a sandbox and a Smart Board.

It's one of 10 preschool classrooms at the Center in Covington for children ranging from 3 to 5 years old. The teachers and staff work to give students everything they need at their last stop before kindergarten.

Logan leaves his blocks neatly piled inside the wooden cubby they came from, and he settles into his next learning station: the writing center. Logan's class includes 3-year-old Timmy, who will attend preschool next year full-time.

Timmy, a tiny tot with a head full of bright blonde hair and hypnotizing blue eyes, is not only a part-time student at the center for speech therapy, but he's also the Preschool Literacy Coach Rebecca Zmurk's adopted son.

"The first time my husband and I met Timmy, he was 10 months old and looked so sweet but also slightly confused," says the 43-year-old first-time mother. "When my husband reached for him, Timmy instantly went into his arms with such innocence that it made both

of us shed a tear. He was the first child that we fostered and we were more terrified of him than he was of us.”

That fear soon redirected itself as they worked to gear their son up for his future. As a mother and a literacy coach, Zmurk knows the benefits of teaching children early.

“Timmy, like most children his age, are little sponges,” she says. “It’s a perfect reason to focus efforts on early childhood programs now and make the difference instead of later on when bigger barriers are in place.”

Zmurk knows parent involvement is key, but that it takes a village to get Timmy and all other students in Covington “kindergarten-ready.” That’s what the education initiative Success By Six is all about.

“It’s a collaboration of agencies with common goals,” says Suzanne Thompson, James E. Biggs’ elementary director. “We’re working [together] for the common good. We all want students to succeed.”

Roots of success

In 2001, the United Way and community leaders participated in Cincinnati CAN (Community Action Now). In 2002, United Way launched Success By Six, an initiative to improve school preparedness through community change, says Amy Neal, manager for United Way’s Success By Six program in Northern Kentucky.

The early work of the initiative included only Hamilton County in Ohio and Boone County in Kentucky. The work led to identifying the initiative’s No. 1 priority: kindergarten-readiness, which in turn led to an expansion of the Success By Six program into Covington and other Northern Kentucky schools in 2007.

“Success By Six is a long-term, collaborative effort aimed at ensuring children are ready to succeed by the time they start kindergarten,” says Neal. “In the early childhood work in Northern Kentucky, there is a track record of identifying a problem and bringing the right people to the table for collective impact.”

Thompson says it’s important to provide students and families the tools they need. Before Success By Six, Neal says 50 percent of children “just showed up at kindergarten” with no prior education or learning experiences.

“It’s not ok for our kids not to be kindergarten-ready,” Neal says.

Partners include Children, Inc., Housing Authority of Covington, Covington Independent Public Schools, Every Child Succeeds, 4C for Children, Head Start, Northern Kentucky University, United Way and the Resilient Children Project.

While Success By Six doesn't provide direct services to children, parents or providers, the initiative builds partnerships with providers who have results-focused expertise. Partners share a commitment to Success By Six through vision and mission.

“Success By Six is leading the work in Northern Kentucky by serving as the convener for the ‘cradle’ component of the Strive [cradle to career] education continuum,” Neal says.

Everyone brings something to the table, from resources to expertise.

“We can do more together than any one organization,” Neal says. “When they get to kindergarten, they’re where they need to be. We’re connecting the dots.”

Connecting the dots starts young, very young. In fact, Success by Six begins with academies called The Toyota bornlearning Academy.

Baby steps

“The early years are so critical,” Neal says.

Starting very early, bornlearning Academy is all about parents engaging with their children, so once they enter childcare, then preschool, then kindergarten, they are already learning and motivated to learn.

Bornlearning Academies, which include six in-home sessions with families, recognize the connection between school and home and focus on establishing relationships with the child and parents before kindergarten starts. Families learn how to turn every day moments into learning experiences at home, Neal says.

Starting this young is important, she adds, because it addresses the whole child from the beginning—assessing their strengths and weaknesses and exposing them to learning opportunities.

In an effort to identify more children and engage more families, Every Child Succeeds makes home visits, starting before babies are born. They teach families how they can start teaching their children even before they enter childcare centers. They are provided early screenings for developmental delays.

Zmurk, who’s been at James E. Biggs for six years and a part of Success By Six for five years, works every day with children much like her son, Timmy. And she’s noted a shift in the educational paradigm. “Preschool is like the new kindergarten,” she says.

As a literacy coach, she teaches 4-year-old preschoolers how to read and visits seven area childcare centers to train teachers and staff. She coaches them to increase the quality of childcare and therefore, the quality of learning before children move on to preschools like hers increases.

Zmurk teaches childcare providers what preschool teachers expect their young charges to know in an effort to better prepare them for success.

“It’s a shift of thinking that’s taking place in the childcare centers,” she says.

By giving them the training they need as well as materials and support, she is helping move childcare centers in Covington, which used to score at only state-minimum status to a 120-percent increase in Star-Rated centers.

“She’s a hand-holder, cheerleader and coach,” Neal says.

Success within reach

With educators moving in a more syncopated rhythm, teachers can better know what their students have been exposed to before the first day of school.

“[We’re] definitely moving in the right direction,” Neal says.

And they’ve seen tremendous results over the past five years:

- Developed here, The Toyota bornlearning® Academies have been highlighted by United Way Worldwide as a best practice and expanded to 10 schools statewide. A \$115,000 grant was secured for the statewide expansion and a \$25,000 grant from Toyota was secured for local work.
- The development of a coaching model (Coaching to Quality) has resulted in a 121-percent increase in the number of Northern Kentucky’s quality-rated childcare centers.
- Close to \$100,000 is being leveraged to promote school readiness through Community Early Childhood Council grants. Regional strategies complement existing work, including screening for developmental delays and targeted professional development.
- Although it experienced a drop last year, Covington has seen an increase in the percentage of children entering kindergarten “prepared” over the past five years.
- Students who have taken part in Success By Six programs perform better—their scores are generally higher—at kindergarten entry versus children from elsewhere in the community.
- In Covington, children who have participated in Success By Six programs and who participate in Coaching to Quality are more developmentally on track than their peers.

While concrete statistics for Covington are not available yet, proponents see proof in the face of a teacher when a 4-year-old student reads to them or in a child who is singing a

song with their parents or in a childcare provider who teaches a student how to socialize with peers.

In Covington, success is the sound of children laughing while learning by stacking blocks, building with Play-Doh and sand, understanding math and science through games and touch-screen flashcards.

"Sometimes it's baby steps, and other times it's giant leaps," says Zmurk.

"It's been huge—getting structured," says Thompson. "All the work done prior to kindergarten continues to close the gap of where [students] need to be—graduating high school, going to college—to be successful adults."

Steady progress

"This is not a sprint—but a marathon," Neal says. "And we are moving in the right direction."

Success and continued success is seen through the eyes of each teacher, educator, volunteer and parent—even if kids like Timmy and Logan don't know it now.

Logan, who will attend kindergarten next year, picks up a thick yellow pencil with an equally thick pink eraser and begins to write his name on the top right corner of his spelling paper. Teaching assistant Miss Lisa sits next to him at the half-circle table, guiding his hand to spell L-O-G-A-N.

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