The Failure of Our Preschools

Of course there are good explanations. Many of our children live in poverty and suffer from inter-generational problems --- domestic violence, parental substance abuse, incarcerated parents, foster care placement due to abuse and neglect. As a result many children suffer from a state of trauma which parallels those of returning military from war zones. This background is true.

But this is also true. In Dorchester Country, the latest available annual data indicates that less than half of the children entering Kindergarten are ready for it. While results for elementary schools outside of the City of Cambridge indicate a higher degree of readiness, within the City of Cambridge for the 2017 school year, the rate of readiness was 35% in the case of children entering Choptank Elementary School, 29% of those entering Sandy Hill and *only 10%* of those entering Maple Elementary School. To make matters worse, the highest rate of Pre-K failure is in our county’s Head Start Program (managed separately from DCPS). The recent ‘readiness rate’ for children enrolled in Head Start ranges between 13 and 30 %.

By any standard, this is a catastrophe. And it is an expensive catastrophe. For the school year starting September 2017, the per-student cost of each child enrolled in a Pre-K program in Dorchester Country was $1,882. But the cost is not limited to the failure of pre-school. The cost continues on up the system as children enter elementary, middle and high school without learning the reasons for being a good student. It is also seen in the societal costs of truancy, juvenile delinquency, and adult crime by children who become adults without the education, interest, or skills to be employed. The cost is also illustrated by the difficulties of classroom management and the unfairness of having the behavior of pre-school failures prevent children who want to learn the opportunity to learn. Another cost is the turnover of good teachers in the Dorchester System who move on to other school systems that have less classroom disruption. These are other real costs.

What should we do about this? What we know is that we cannot leave it like it is. We cannot ignore it. We cannot continue to fund programs which are consistent failures.

Should we look at what has been done to solve this problem elsewhere? Perhaps. Poverty has been reduced by 28% in Brazil after welfare payments were made contingent on parents enrolling their children in school 85% of the time. When contingencies were placed on family welfare payments, school performance among the poor increased and dropouts decreased. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kenrapoza/2013/11/01/in-brazil-social-welfare-programs-worked/#7b66bb3c3f50>

Perhaps making welfare contingent on school enrollment in Dorchester Country might have a parallel positive impact.

Or should we have each child in the county be assisted by a mentor or volunteer in the local community, someone who could help guide the child in the way h/she should behave?

Mentorship programs that function outside of school systems have been proven to be effective but are expensive. Where would the funding come for them? Programs to help socialize infants and toddlers have helped parents and day care providers to prepare children for kindergarten. How do we avoid stigmatizing parents and caretakers who are overwhelmed trying to provide a roof over the head of a family and food on the table and instead support their efforts effectively and economically while not pointing fingers?

Should we encourage a flowering of programs to arrive at multiple solutions and finance those programs on the basis of their results?

All we know is that the system of preschool is broken in Dorchester Country and we can’t afford not to fix it.

Budget time for the school system is fast approaching where decisions will be made on where money should be spent moving forward to improve educational outcomes for the children of our community. If the community does not express its views on what needs to change, we are going to have the same results we have now.

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SH Preschool Note 5

Documents