What Is School Readiness?

Sharon Easterling, DVAEYC Executive Director

Most people understand school readiness to mean that children can write the letters in their name, count to 10 or 20, and sing or say the alphabet. Yet research tells us what kindergarten teachers intuitively understand - that children are more likely to be successful in school if they know how to take turns, if they get along well with others, if they can keep working on a task even when it gets hard, and if they are confident in their ability to succeed.

Often overlooked, these social-emotional skills are key. High quality early childhood programs and strong families support children’s growth in these critical areas. Our challenge is that too many young children are spending the majority of their time in low quality child care settings or informal care arrangements, while a significant number of adult caregivers are caught up in the struggle to survive and unable to give attention to children’s developmental needs.

One of my staff recently encountered a situation which illustrates the imperative to support children’s emotional well-being. She was at a STAR 2 program doing quality improvement work, when she noticed a three-year-old boy sobbing inconsolably. She asked the teacher if she knew what was wrong and the reply was, “He’s a foster kid; they cry.”

She made the decision to intervene, and as the boy calmed down he started to say the name AJ - over and over. Again, she asked the teacher and was told that AJ was his 2-year old brother who was in another classroom at this center. She brought the young child to the toddler classroom and discovered AJ - also crying inconsolably. When the two boys saw each other they embraced fiercely, refusing to let go.

Reflecting on this incident, we thought about how sad and telling it was that a two and three year old had to comfort one another because the adults in their lives were unable to do so. We were reminded that far too many of our children are dealing with trauma that, if not addressed, will make it impossible for them to be successful learners.

Schools can also support parents to engage with their young children - talk, ask, wonder, sing, read, model, show, explain - to help reduce the 30 million word gap. That’s the difference in the number of words heard by children growing up in well-educated families versus their low-income counterparts. DVAEYC has just published a guide for parents that suggests how such activities can be incorporated into daily living. It’s not complicated, but it may not be intuitive for some parents.

Another critical message is that choosing a child care program is one of the most important decisions they can make.

We simply don’t have a large enough supply of high quality early learning settings where staff have the tools to support children’s social and emotional needs. That’s why DVAEYC has joined with our partners PCCY, United Way and the Economy League in a statewide effort to expand funding so that every three and four year old in Pennsylvania has access to a high quality program—whether Head Start, PreK Counts, or STAR 4 child care. We need everyone to join the PreK for PA campaign in order to make early childhood education a top issue in state elections this year.

But we can also do better with the resources we have to support school readiness. First and foremost, we must break down the silos that exist between elementary schools and the early childhood programs that serve their future students. We need principals and directors, preschool and primary grade teachers to forge working relationships - not a once-a-year meetings at kindergarten registration time, but ongoing meaningful dialogue about how to best support young children. We have much to learn from each other, and the inclusion of community-based programs in schools’ professional development offerings would benefit both groups.

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Close to 70,000 children in Philadelphia alone spend all or part of their day in non-parental care. Let’s be honest: this is more than a babysitting service to allow parents to work; this is the de-facto education system for our youngest children. Are they being parked in front of a television for long periods? Are they managed and moved around without much purpose? Or are they engaged in developmentally appropriate learning?
What if you’re not a STAR 3 or 4 program?

If you’re in a STAR 3 or 4 program, advocating for expansion of high quality ECE is a no-brainer. Chances are good that whatever funding stream is increased, your program will be eligible to participate. Thus, such programs will provide the bedrock of support from the ECE community for the Pre-K for PA campaign. But what if you haven’t attained STAR 3 or 4, or have chosen to operate outside the STARS system altogether? What is the impetus to be an advocate for high quality?

You may be in a program that has been NAEYC-accredited for years, and has built up a stellar reputation in your community, but doesn’t serve enough low-income children to be eligible for STARS awards. Or your pre-school may be associated with a private school that is accredited by the Department of Education. You know you provide high quality and you are passionate about all children having access to programs such as yours.

Or you may have a long and solid reputation in your community, providing a service that families around you value highly; you would choose to be recognized and compensated by a high STAR rating, but experience blocks to advancing to STAR 3. Or you may be just starting out with a vision of offering the very best to young children in your neighborhood, or you may be taking over a low-performing but promising program with the intention of turning it around.

If our goal is to provide access for all three and four year olds in the state to high quality pre-school, that effort will require the participation of every early childhood educator who understands the importance of quality. Expansion will take place in programs that have the capacity or potential to offer a high quality experience, but need some additional way to demonstrate that capacity, or some assistance to reach that potential. The work of the Pre-K for PA campaign in the coming year must include identifying the barriers that such programs experience, and finding ways to overcome them. These programs are critical to the success of the campaign.

Then there are others that have not demonstrated a passion or capacity for quality. These may be people who have been dedicated to caring for and keeping children safe for years, but who haven’t shown an interest in enriching their programs to offer more than that. Others may see the entrepreneurial opportunity in child care, but haven’t grasped the importance of the quality of service they are offering to families. Then, at the far end of the spectrum lie those who have discovered that it’s possible to work the system to their advantage: if they can cut enough corners with wages and food service and a child-warehousing mentality, they can make a sufficient profit from subsidy payments to offer incentives that pull families away from higher quality programs.

One of our challenges as early childhood educators is to acknowledge at the same time the critical importance of high quality and the ongoing reality of low quality in much of the field. However, with the Pre-K for PA campaign, we have an opportunity to draw a line—not at STAR 3, but between those who care about quality and those who don’t.

Those who don’t care need encouragement to leave the field. Those who care need to be at the table, working out ways to increase our flexibility and expand our resources and capacity to offer high quality programs to more of our children.

To get involved in the Pre-K for PA campaign, go to www.prekforpa.org. To arrange a visit from a Pre-K for PA organizer, or explore other opportunities, contact Suzann at DVAEYC (suzann@dvaeyc.org or 215-893-0130).

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activities? Are they encouraged to explore their interests and experiment to learn how and why?

It doesn’t matter whether we call these programs child care centers, Head Start, PreK, family and group child care, nursery school or something else. What matters is what is happening while children are there. Settings are either supporting children’s growth and development or not.

Schools can be significant messengers to families on how important it is to choose an early childhood program well. A new online resource from Great Philly Schools can help parents with this task; building on their successful K-12 website, GPS will soon be launching a new early childhood education section, populated with programs that meet quality standards.

Our schools are facing enormous financial challenges. Ultimately, it is incumbent upon all of us as citizens of this Commonwealth to make education funding a priority and to see that funds are fairly distributed across Pennsylvania. This will require political leaders who are willing to lead on education—and adequate funding of early childhood education must be part of the conversation.

Our schools, our high quality early childhood programs and our parents, working together, can ensure that all of our children are ready for success. Let’s get it right—right from the start!

From testimony to the Philadelphia School Reform Commission. June 2, 2014

Expanding Quality Capacity

We need to hear from you!

What is keeping you from attaining a STAR 3 or 4 rating in Keystone STARS?

What administrative changes, changes in the career lattice, or additional resources would allow you to move forward in STARS?

If you believe that you are already running a high quality program outside of STARS, Pre-K Counts or Head Start, how might that quality be measured by a state agency?

If you have answers to these questions, or other ideas about expanding the capacity of the field to offer high quality early education services, please contact Pamela Haines at pamela@dvaeyc.org or 215-349-9428x228.
Reflections on the Shared Service Alliance

Leslie Spina, Director, Kinder Academy

Back when SharedSourcePA was getting off the ground, I was part of the beta test team. In the past, this industry has been very closed and not interested in sharing, so that was a change to the culture. As a result of that group collaboration, with multiple centers offering their experience and insight, best practice information is now very much available. Though the centers in the beta test group were very different, we all did the same work and struggled with the same issues, so it was a good basis for us to come together.

Since then, I’ve used Shared Source to keep updated on my personnel and family policies, to find resources for staff, to get discounts for teacher and family incentives and planning field trips. Any time we’re in the process of changing a policy or looking to expand what we’re doing, I go to SharedSource. It is a resource for fresh ideas.

Our new Philadelphia Early Learning Alliance has the right people, because we all have the same overarching goal: everyone there is committed to quality, and to improving their program and saving money in the process. The start-up of any new program, no matter what it is, has challenges, and we’ve had them. We spent a lot of time in the first year figuring out who had what expertise, and which leader had the best resources to share. But we’ve come together as a group, and there are few issues we didn’t agree on or find a way to work out.

The biggest strength our alliance has is that members volunteer to take on a piece of work because they’re already doing it, or have an interest in it, then come back to the group with what they know. We can glean more information and get more things going because instead of five or six individuals looking separately, we all come together and share.

Our first priority was saving money in delivering high quality professional development to our staff. We have hired two mentor teachers who are working with all of the teachers in the Alliance. These mentors support the classrooms in two different ways. They support the ERS system by helping teachers understand how the tool is used, then choosing areas to work on together. They also follow up on professional development training, meeting with teachers to determine what additional understanding, skills or materials they need in order to put new learning into practice. This is not an easy task; the teachers have to come to trust that they will get support and not punishment as they learn to navigate new information, systems or best practice.

This whole project took more time to ramp up than expected, and we’re now working to make better use of the mentors’ time and cut back the transition time between centers. We’re also working on putting together a blog for teachers who have gone to similar trainings and want to implement what they’ve learned, to communicate and share information with each other.

Over the ensuing months, directors from these programs met together to consider:

- the financial challenges of operating a high-quality center for less than 100 children;
- the need for time, space and engaged leadership to achieve results for children -- especially those who face barriers to learning;
- possibilities for sharing professional development, payroll, benefits, maintenance, tutoring services, grant-writing and substitutes; and
- alternative models that separate and strengthen pedagogical leadership and business management, using shared staff and a team approach.

A new Shared Service Alliance was formally launched last year. Member programs are Kinder Academy, Woodland Academy, Tuny Haven International ELC, Chinatown Learning Center, St. Mary’s Nursery School, and Community Concern #13 Day Care Center. They continue to work with DVAEYC and the Public Health Management Corporation (PHMC) staff on business planning, and establishing a separate 501(c)(3) non-profit to manage the project.

In 2013, DVAEYC helped gather together a small group of early childhood providers to explore the possibilities of starting a Shared Services Alliance. We were inspired by the model of an alliance of six child care programs in Seattle that share specialized staff, business practices and program development, with the goal of creating and sustaining the highest possible quality programming for children from a wide array of cultural, linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds.

Our monthly meetings have been a great support to the directors. We talk about the alliance work that we’re doing, but then we also share about difficulties we’re having. For example, we were all struggling with the new rules on water safety and we used some of our time together to get everyone current; we arranged a Water Safety Training for Alliance members and have even hired a shared lifeguard. I expect next year to be more fluid in the areas where we have gained expertise, but I also expect there will be new challenges as we continue expanding the scope of our work.

We have clearly decided that the first priority has to be training our staff but, looking forward, it would be a fantastic success if we could add a component of very high level training for directors and assistant directors, offering new research, new technology, and a broader view of the field as a whole. We’ve really struggled with getting a sub pool off the ground, but haven’t given up. We’re looking at doing some grant writing. I would love to see some other alliances get up and running. The big push of our Alliance has been for staff development, but if another group’s need is back office support, they could develop an alliance based on that need. I would like to demonstrate to other leaders in this industry that, although this work has a cost, better environments for children—a value that is hard to quantify—are priceless.
This is What Quality Looks Like!

A well-equipped program offers many ways to encourage children’s innate curiosity about the world. Changing Lanes, Darby

If you can’t get outside, there are many other ways to learn about the wonders of nature. The Gateway School

It’s never too early to discover the joy of creation. A Child’s First Step, Philadelphia

Math made easy with lots of hands-on experiences and a teacher to facilitate the learning. Wonderkey, Philadelphia

Developing self-help skills is one of many goals of a Head Start program. The Lighthouse, Philadelphia

There are lots of ways to get help with literacy, from technology—or from a friend. Elbow Lane, Warrington (above), and St. Thomas Nursery School, Fort Washington (below).
Like!

Nature provides open-ended opportunities for exploring a variety of learning domains.

An airplane trip, with lots of props and roles, helps children build social-emotional, problem-solving—and sometimes big motor—skills all at the same time. St. Andrews Nursery School, Audobon

It can sometimes be a challenge to support the risk-taking that children need for developing their competence and self-confidence! Playscapes, documented by Svane Frode in Northern Europe.

Multipurpose materials, even in a small outdoor space, can encourage a variety of skill-building activities. Changing Lanes, Darby

Changing Lanes, Darby (above), and St. Thomas Nursery School, Fort Washington. Nothing beats unit blocks for building a foundation in engineering and math. Beth Of, Maple Glen

As children become aware of their role as members of a group, they build basic skills of citizenship. Aunt Di’s Childcare, Philadelphia

Writing can be fun Goddard School, Saratoga

Creativity is nurtured when the emphasis is on process rather than product. Goddard School, Saratoga

If you have a photo that illustrates high quality ECE, please send it, along with a caption, to pamela@dvaeyc.org for possible inclusion in a future issue of Connection.
Improving the Classroom Practice

Phyllis Kohn, DVAEYC Quality Improvement Coordinator

As someone who provides technical assistance to programs participating in Success by Six®, I have the unique opportunity of working closely with teachers for eighteen months, helping them to improve their classroom practice and reflecting with them on what impact participating in a quality improvement initiative has on their practice.

JoAnn Stewart is a preschool teacher with 19 years’ experience in the field. She works at Agape Childcare and Development Center and agreed to share some of her thoughts with readers of Connection:

PK: What changes have you experienced professionally since you started in the field?

JS: I earned a CDA almost a year ago, which taught me how children learn physically, mentally, socially and intellectually. I now provide more hands-on learning for the children. I love teaching children, and want them to learn, and I find it more effective to give them the hands-on experiences.

PK: What has participation in Success by Six® meant to you as a teacher?

JS: Success by Six® encouraged me to change from what had been my normal routine. When I first heard about it, I said, “This is going to be a lot of work—people are so reluctant to change”. But change would be better for the children.

Despite all the paperwork, it is worth it. Success by Six® has allowed me to improve my knowledge in teaching children as well as supporting the families. They sent technical assistants who not only shared their knowledge but also worked with me hands on: giving materials, holding meetings, sending emails, and especially modeling how to improve the quality of care.

You have encouraged me from the first day we met. I have always tried to do everything with pride. Now I feel as though I can. I don’t struggle with teaching the children. With the knowledge I have gained I am more confident; I can stand on my own two feet, and don’t second guess myself. I feel good in knowing that this is what I do and I am okay doing it. I am in it for the long haul.

PK: What do you think we still need to do to improve early care and education for young children and their families?

JS: Early Care and Education is more than babysitting. People in the field should go to school to learn about how to care for the child’s complete development. We need to help families understand how important it is to work together. We need to reinforce the child’s learning not only in school but in the home as well. I believe this will allow them to have a stable balance in their lives.

PK: Can you share a success story from your classroom?

JS: I was working on triangles with one of the four year olds in my classroom. “I don’t know what to do with triangles,” he said. “How many sides does a triangle have?” I asked. “Well, three,” he replied. Then he took some play doh, made three lines with it and created a triangle. Next he took three craft sticks and created another triangle. Next he took a square piece of paper. He said “I see a triangle in the square.” “Really?” I asked. He folded the square on the diagonal to make a triangle. “Is there anything else you can do with the triangle?” I asked. He cut the square diagonally. He folded the paper again creating four triangles. He then took two of those triangles and made a diamond. He said, “Look what I can do!!!” How awesome it is to help children explore and discover!
There have been two huge challenges for me: not having a regular classroom of students to plan for and share smiles with every day; and not having enough time in the day to reach more child care centers, preschools, parents, and teachers to introduce them to the Pre-K for PA campaign. I am seeing great things though. What early childhood educators do every day in their classrooms—gently changing diapers while speaking to the child, creating elaborate playful lessons on what’s in dirt, reading stories in a way that the children can share their thoughts as the story is told—directly impacts the quality of life for all of Pennsylvania! And I am very grateful for all the smiles and laughs that my new peers at DVAEYC are quick to share with me.”
DVAEYC champions high quality early care and education for all young children (birth-eighth) in Southeastern Pennsylvania through professional development, advocacy, and public engagement.

Patricia Baxter,
President

Sharon Easterling,
Executive Director

Pamela Haines,
Connection Editor

Please consider DVAEYC when making your United Way contribution.

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