Community Voices: The achievement gap starts as an opportunity gap; VPK can help

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Welcome to the Catalyst’s Community Voices platform. We’ve curated community leaders and thinkers from all parts of our great city to speak on issues that affect us all. Visit our Community Voices page for more details.

Whether in news articles or on TV, we continue to hear about efforts to improve struggling schools in low-income communities. What is often left out of the conversation is the hard fact that these children were struggling before they even entered the public school system in kindergarten. Considering that 90% of brain development occurs before a child turns 5 years old, waiting to provide quality education until they arrive at kindergarten is too late! The achievement gap we all read about is not an ability gap – it begins as an opportunity gap.

However, there is hope. With a mission to revolutionize early learning to inspire children, engage families and elevate educators, the Early Learning Coalition (ELC) aims to ensure every child enters kindergarten confident and ready to succeed. Our niche is equitable access to high-quality early learning opportunities.
Preschool tuitions exceed the cost of a state college, yet preschool owners are barely scraping by. ELC provides scholarships for young children to attend preschool and supports for providers through training, coaching and wage supplements to ensure quality.

We could and should celebrate that Pinellas County leads the state in kindergarten readiness, as measured by the Department of Education, with 60 percent of Pinellas students “ready” compared to only 53 percent statewide. Nevertheless, this still indicates that 40 percent of our children are not entering kindergarten with a strong foundation. What’s more, children in low-income communities are disproportionately disadvantaged from the start. Only 18 percent of children at Campbell Park; 23 percent at Melrose; 30 percent of New Heights and 32 percent at Fairmount Park entered “ready.” The disparity is made obvious when the countywide school readiness rate stands at 60 percent, with north county schools such as Ozona and Brooker Creek reporting 83 and 78 percent respectively.

We can change this. We already have the answer - high quality early learning programs. This is not a new idea. In fact, Florida voters recognized the value of early learning in preparing children for kindergarten in 2002, when they amended the constitution to include a universal pre-K program. This led to the Voluntary Prekindergarten program, known as VPK. The universal program is free to all 4-year-olds and provided through preschools, public schools, private schools and faith-based centers. It is typically offered as a half-day program, but additional scholarships are available to eligible children who need a full day of care. Required instructor training and program standards for VPK are slightly higher than those required by licensing. However, an instructor with fewer hours of training than your local hair stylist typically teaches it. That’s right, a VPK instructor must have 120 hours of training; my hairdresser has 1,200! This is not to say that we don’t have good instructors – quite the contrary. We have amazing instructors. The challenge is to keep them. Preschool is a labor of love for most, but that doesn’t pay the rent. Many of our preschool teachers can’t attend trainings at night because they are forced to work a second job in order to feed their families. The low wages and lack of benefits also make it hard to recruit certified teachers in this field.

For all the talk about increasing teacher pay, preschool instructors are making about half of what a kindergarten teacher makes. Another challenge, most preschools are not staffed with a behavior specialist or curriculum resource teacher to assist in their lesson plans. They are already doing good things and could do great things with our support.

Despite the challenges, VPK is absolutely making a difference. Reports show that 69 percent of children who complete VPK are “ready,” compared to only 42 percent of children who did not attend VPK. About 75 percent of our eligible 4 year old children participate each year, and among low-income children participation is closer to only 50 percent.

We can do better. You can help.

- Keep the conversation going and bring attention to the topic. Talk about the importance of VPK with your family, employees and fellow community leaders.
- Actively show appreciation for the work our child care workers do. Go out of your way to thank our child care workers and support your child's learning during those critically important developmental years.
- Allow your employees time off to tour preschools to find the right spot for their child.
- Want to do even more? Visit www.eclipinellas.net to learn more about the problems in our community and help lend your voice and efforts to advocating on behalf of this important issue, as well as raise funds to address the need.

It is not a secret that a strong school system leads to a thriving community and a strong economy. School doesn’t start in kindergarten - it starts in our early learning centers. It starts with VPK.