

Onondaga Citizens League meeting notes—Aug 14, 2013

1

Meeting held at ProLiteracy, 104 Marcellus St., Syracuse

Co-chairs: Paul Predmore and Laurie Black

Attendees: Hal Breon, Minna Buck, Brenda Bush, Ginny Carmody, Mark Clary, Glenda Criss, Paula Freedman, Nancy Gabriel, Maria Gill, Connie Gregory, Melissa Hidek, Peter Knoblock, Annette Krisak, Cynda Lamb, Peggy Liuzzi, Don MacLaughlin, Colleen McAllister, Nancy McCarty, Sarah McIlvain, Lauren Merola, Brian Moore, Linda Peresinni, Gerri Regan, Eric Rogers, Chandra Smith, Marsha Tait, Sandy Temes, Nathalie Warren, Carol Williams

Presenters:

- Donna DeSiato, superintendent of East Syracuse Minoa Central School District
- Marie Perkins, director of the Syracuse City School District's Early Childhood Programs
- Kelly Rovtar, a kindergarten teacher at Seymour Dual Language Academy, and a pre-k teacher in the summer program at Dr. Edwin E Weeks Elementary School

OCL: Sandra Barrett

Summary: Today's meeting provided insight from local school administrators and teachers on how well they think their programs prepare children for kindergarten and what challenges schools, districts and teachers face in regards to the issue of school readiness.

Upcoming Meetings: All regular study committee meetings will be held from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m., on alternating Tuesdays and Thursdays, at ProLiteracy, 104 Marcellus Street, Syracuse. The next meetings will be:

- Thursday, September 12
- Tuesday, September 24

Special Presentation:

There will be a special meeting on Wednesday, October 23, from 3 – 4 p.m. at ProLiteracy, with Ralph Smith, senior vice president at the Annie E. Casey Foundation and managing director of their Campaign for Grade-Level Reading.

Subcommittees:

Committee members are invited to participate on one (or more) of the subcommittees listed below. Subcommittee topics can be considered the main themes that have emerged so far in the Early Childhood Education discussions, and these themes need further research, development and refinement. Subcommittees meet separately from the larger committee to discuss these topics, gather

research/resources and eventually present what they've learned to the main committee. To sign up for a subcommittee, contact Sandra Barrett at 315-443-4846 or ssbarret@uc.syr.edu.

- Local Data and Funding: 0-5 population and poverty census data; child care supply and need; local statistics on school readiness, literacy, absenteeism, graduation rates, etc.; public investments in child care in Onondaga County.
- Family Supports: current parenting programs and other family support programs; summer and after-school programs.
- Delivery System: quality and effectiveness indicators; networks and partnerships; priorities.
- Model Programs and Practices: summary of national research findings on early childhood education and learning; examples of effective programs from other communities; examples of local best practices (Chemung County may be a good place to start).

Today's Topic: School Readiness

Donna DeSiato, the superintendent of East Syracuse Minoa Central School District (ESM), said she saw a Venn diagram this morning with two, slightly overlapping circles. The first circle included "things you can control" and the second circle included "things you are passionate about," and where they intersect is where you should focus your energy. She thinks this concept, focusing on only what you can control and are passionate about is "perfect for this study topic."

She said that for school districts they can only control what happens with the child when he or she is in school. So, at which point the child enters the school district (at a kindergarten level or pre-k level), can make a huge difference. "The research agrees," she said. "Children are born ready to learn."

She referred the study committee to the research briefing, "The Full-Day Advantage," which was prepared for the Winning Beginning NY Campaign (www.winningbeginning.org), a statewide coalition working toward high-quality, affordable and accessible early care and learning for all New York families.

There is no common definition for school readiness, she said. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (www.naeyc.org) has said, and she agrees, that in terms of readiness, "It's about children, families, early environment, schools and communities.... It's what are the influences in [students] environment that give them that advantage of being more ready perhaps than others."

Five areas have been determined to be critical to early learning:

1. physical well-being and motor development
2. social/emotional development
3. approaches toward learning

4. language development
5. cognition and general knowledge

These five major areas are what most of the early childhood programs and curricula are built upon.

She's a board member of Success by 6 (www.unitedway-cny.org/RESULTS/successby6/), and she said the initiative focuses a lot of its attention on the physical development of children and their health and wellbeing. "Without this, it can seriously disadvantage a child," she said.

In terms of assessing children for kindergarten readiness, she thinks it's a good thing that there is no universal measurement in a paper and pen form, because a test couldn't reflect the complex and individualized manner in which children are currently observed and evaluated by teachers in the classroom. When a child plays at a play dough station, for example, and exemplifies fine motor skill development and early literacy skills, plus appropriate social skills, such as sharing, how does a test then quantify that information?

There's also an issue of trust. "We need to allow a child to develop a relationship that's trusting and that's safe so that they can then demonstrate what they know," she said. "Otherwise, just their fear of being with someone they don't know may not give them a true reading."

A standardized measure might also focus too much responsibility on the child, she said. "It would put the onus of readiness solely on the child.... And the onus of school readiness should be on: family, school, community as well as children." she said.

There are ways in which we can gather information about readiness, she said, but the bigger question is: How do we as a community evaluate and create the opportunities necessary to help guarantee readiness?

For ESM, the district has pre-k programs for children aged 1 through 4. At the 4-year-old level, pre-k is universal and transportation is provided. For 3 year olds, it isn't universal and there are waitlists. For 2 year olds, the program is smaller, and there is an even longer waitlist. For the 1-year-old program, an adult must attend with them, and this, she said, helps bridge the gap between home and school. Parents are involved at other levels of the pre-K programs, and this higher parental involvement (compared to the K-12 school system) is one reason why childcare experts had once encouraged pre-k programs to be separate from the K-12 schools. "They wanted to preserve and create stronger relationships with parents and parent-engagement than the K-12 programs do," she said. "In K-12, we say, 'Leave your child here at the door, and go away.'"

The first challenge she had at ESM was helping the district transition from half-day kindergarten to full day. “We know that it is absolutely better preparing our children,” she said.

In terms of early assessment results of kindergarteners, she said: “More and more as we align with the common core, it’s moving in the right direction and honoring the fact that children think, that they aren’t empty vessels that we are filling with information.... We have to honor the development of thinking and problem-solving and that they will demonstrate their ability to apply that knowledge over time at their different stages.”

In terms of pre-K and kindergarten readiness, she said: “Most children who are given that opportunity for a pre-k experience, by the time they are entering kindergarten, they are better prepared than the children who have not had that experience.” For children who have had the pre-k experience and full-day kindergarten, “90 percent are on grade level as they enter first grade,” she said.

Syracuse City School District

Marie Perkins, director of the Syracuse City School District’s (SCSD) Early Childhood Programs, distributed examples of the types of assessments that are used in pre-k classrooms throughout the district, including those that are run at partnering agencies.

SCSD pre-k programs are in its school buildings, but also at agencies and other learning centers, such as Elmcrest and Parkside. “One of the challenges,” she said, “is how do we all work together in all of these environments to prepare our kids? ...What you have is our expectations for all of our [universal preschool programs] in agencies and school buildings.”

Around 1,350 4-year-olds are enrolled in the SCSD pre-k program. Some 3-yr-olds are in the programs, as well, but the district enrolls 4-year-olds first, and if there is space, they will place 3 year olds.

The SCSD works with a diverse population and includes integrated programs, in which children who have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are in the same classrooms as children who don’t have IEPs. There are also classrooms with no IEPs, but some of the children may have a service, such as speech therapy.

The SCSD has been doing a lot of curriculum writing since the common core has been adopted, she said. “It has put a whole new set of challenges for pre-k: How do we provide students with that developmentally appropriate environment and activities, while [the teachers] work toward this rigorous academic program?”

She said the district's superintendent tried to align the pre-k curriculum with this goal in mind, and she did this by taking the districts best practices and comparing it with what the common core was requiring.

Even so, the pre-k classroom still provides children with experiences that allow them to learn in a natural environment. "Not paper-pencil stuff," she said.

Another goal this year is to better involve and inform the K-12 principals of what's going on in the pre-k classroom. "Some principals may not have had pre-k experiences," she said. They might not understand the importance of play and that every activity is purposefully designed for learning.

Next, she shared results of assessments of children in full-day SCSD pre-k classrooms with half-day programs and those at agencies. These results are available on the PowerPoint presentation included on the OCL's Website at: onondagacitizensleague.org/ocl_studies/2013/presentations.htm.

Overall, she said, 73% of kids who are in a full-day pre-K program at an SCSD School have reached the appropriate benchmarks and will enter kindergarten at or above their age levels.

For this year's kindergarten registration, she said, it seemed as if 90% of the children who were in one of the SCSD's pre-k programs are enrolling in the district's kindergarten classes. Previous years, it may have only been 60%, and she doesn't know why this happens; the district doesn't have a database to track children from pre-k to kindergarten, but they're working on developing one. She guesses, though, that one of the reasons why some children not register for SCSD kindergarten is that a family may move out of the district.

For the half-day pre-k children in an SCSD school, 40% have reached the pre-k benchmarks and will enter kindergarten at or above their age level.

For children in an agency pre-k, 70% are at are above their age level.

The data between agencies and the SCSD can be difficult to compare, though, because in agencies, there may be higher numbers of subsidized children who are "in and out" because the parents' eligibility changes as a result of an income change. Also some agency programs are technically considered half-day pre-k, but the kids are at the care center all day. And, some data may include 3 year olds. "We need to do a better job of cleaning up the data," she said.

They want to figure out how they can "stabilize" children's education by finding funding so that they aren't in and out of programs.

A Teacher's Perspective

Next, the committee heard from Kelly Rovtar, a kindergarten teacher at Seymour Dual Language Academy and a pre-k teacher in the summer program at Dr. Edwin E Weeks Elementary School.

To emphasize the difference between her pre-k classroom experience and kindergarten, Rovtar pointed to the simple presence of a phone in the pre-k classroom. Having a phone in the classroom allows a teacher to immediately call a child's parent if he or she is not in school. In the kindergarten class, Rovtar has to wait until the end of the day to find out why the child wasn't present. "That's huge," she said.

"You have so much support [in pre-k]," she said. "I have three TAs. I have the occupational therapist, speech therapist [who push in], and we all work together." She said the kids feel that. "They know that we're working together and that it's a family there."

"Unfortunately," she said, "in the kindergarten classroom, it's just me and a TA, and 27 students. It's shocking to the kids and the parents. If I have students with an IEP, those services may be dropped... and you have to start that process all over again." And if the child wasn't in pre-k, she said, and the parents didn't think the child needed services, it may be about three weeks to a month later that a teacher notices the student may need services, and then, it may be another five months later when the child finally receives help.

Some children who don't have pre-k may be very gifted and adjust well, but other children require more assistance, and so the TA will try to work more with him or her, or she may ask the child to bring her lunch to the classroom so they can work together. However, she said, most of the time, the children who are lagging behind and need the extra help and can't get it, will be the children who will always lag behind in school.

Q&A

One committee member commented on the stark difference of support and resources between a pre-K classroom and kindergarten classroom. Perkins responded by saying, "Pre-k provides kids with experience and student-centered learning that we should be seeing in high schools that we don't see a lot of... There's such a difference between how we encourage students to learn [in pre-k] and how they are expected to learn in other levels.... In trying to connect the pre-k's with the school-age programs, hopefully some of that will rub off, and as we work with principals with the kind of support and learning we provide in pre-k [maybe] they can do something similar to the rest of the school."

DeSiato said that at ESM, they were able to save more than \$300,000 by partnering with another district for printing services, and this allowed ESM to keep its kindergarten classrooms to 20 to 21 kids. “You ask any kindergarten teacher or parent if it makes a difference [to have a smaller class size], and they will tell you absolutely,” she said. She said she moved into administration to be able to make decisions that would impact this type of change within a school.

Another committee member asked about transportation for pre-k programs. ESM, DeSiato said, provides transportation for its 4-year-old program. It does require parents to transport their children if they have not yet turned 4 by September, because then the district would have to invest in car seats, and it’s cost prohibitive. Usually parents only have to drive their kids to school for a month or two, and then they’re old enough for the bus.

Another question was asked about how special services are integrated for children in pre-k and kindergarten. Do they miss gym to get speech therapy? Perkins said that in pre-k, most services are integrated into the classroom activity (as Rovtar explained), but in kindergarten, the resources are limited.

A question was asked about how a child is chosen for full-day pre-k. “The superintendent doesn’t believe in first-come, first-serve,” Perkins said. Instead, they work with families to figure out which program would be the best fit. Some kids are fine in a half-day program, and they need to keep the full-day seats open for kids who have a greater need. They sit down with families to really figure out what the needs of the family.

Also, DeSiato said, originally, in order to get full-day pre-k funding from the state, districts had to show that they were placing children living in poverty as having the highest needs for full-day pre-k.

Another question was asked about the cost for transitioning to a full-day pre-k for everyone in the SCSD. Could this be calculated? Perkins said that would be easy to figure out. DeSiato said that space for extra classrooms is just as much of a concern for districts as is the cost. And Perkins added that districts have a certain amount of kindergarten seats that they need to provide for their students, and that this number is set by the state. If a district moves to full-day kindergarten and the number of seats is reduced, it may affect the amount of state funding.

In terms of children not being ready for kindergarten, Perkins reminded the committee that this happens at every grade. At every grade there will be children who aren’t performing at grade level and teachers must address this in their lesson plans. And for kindergarten, this means that a station will offer an activity for multiple developmental levels, and the teacher will assess the children for what’s appropriate for their level. And students can move from one level to the next easily,

as teachers are constantly observing and keeping track on how children are progressing.

Rovtar said what can hinder progress is the tardiness. “We’re talking about 2½- and 3-hr tardiness.... They’re missing critical time,” she said. Sometimes the parents’ work schedule may not accommodate getting the child to school on time, and at other times, the parent may not value the academic side of school, but values the nutritional lunch that’s offered, and so the kid is sent to school in time for lunch. “When you look at their family history,” Rovtar said. “You understand why it’s important.”

A question was asked about how many CNY districts have universal pre-k, and DeSiato estimated that fewer than 5 have universal pre-k, but nearly 90% have full-day kindergarten. “In our country,” she said, “we have to face the fact that other countries are surpassing us because they are providing opportunities for kids to begin to build potential learning skills at earlier ages. I can’t think of any district...that doesn’t have a high poverty pocket within its district... There are children within those systems that unfortunately lack the opportunity to have a pre-k experience.”

She would like to better engage the business community in supporting pre-K, so that dollars can be shifted to make pre-k universal.

Next Study Meeting

The next meeting will be at 11:30 a.m. at ProLiteracy on Thursday, Sept. 12.