

Op-Ed 2013

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SUPPORT UNITED WAY TO ADVANCE EARLY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES IN WHATCOM COUNTY

Think back to your first day of kindergarten. Were you nervous? Excited? Did you know what to expect? It's very likely that your feelings about that day were determined by the experiences that you had leading up to it. If you had the chance to be around groups of kids beforehand, then you were more prepared. If you had an adult who read to you and worked with you on shapes and colors, then you were more prepared. If you had the opportunity to interact with people in authority roles, then you were also more prepared. Recent studies have shined a light on just how important school readiness is to long-term success in school and beyond.

A massive kindergarten readiness study conducted in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties tracked 719 students in 5 school districts from kindergarten through third and fifth grades to assess how kindergarten readiness is connected to later academic success. The data was very clear: being prepared makes a tremendous difference. Kids who were prepared for kindergarten performed better in English and math in third, fourth and fifth grades than students who had not prepared for kindergarten.

When engaged with reading at an early age, children are less likely to need special education services and are more likely to graduate. Even further, these kids have a better chance to turn into adults who are more likely to be employed and less likely to draw from social services. Early learning and kindergarten readiness can set a successful tone for the rest of a child's life; and we all benefit from this success in the form of a better economy fueled by well-adjusted, skilled adults; reduced crime costs; reduced use of government assistance programs; increased graduation rates; and less costly grade repetition.

These are the reasons the Ferndale School District was the first in Whatcom County to provide free full-time kindergarten to all of its students. These are also the reasons United Way of Whatcom County has made school readiness one of its major goals, and why the Ferndale School District is pleased to partner with United Way of Whatcom County on our Kindergarten Readiness Program.

With financial support from United Way, Ferndale was able to run its first ever “Jump Start” program during the summer of 2013, an intensive month-long educational experience for soon-to-be kindergartners who had not previously had any preschool experience. Through “Jump Start,” the children not only received early literacy support themselves, but their parents also learned about activities they could do at home to help their sons and daughters develop their language and motor skills. “Jump Start” is one of several early learning initiatives United Way is supporting in Ferndale.

Across the country, more than 1.2 million students drop out of school each year, costing more than \$312 billion in lost wages, taxes, and productivity. Our early learning programs can help to turn this statistic around. These programs depend on a variety of partners and volunteers to succeed, reminding us once again that when we work together we achieve more. When kids are ready for school, families are stable, and individuals have the access they need for a healthy life, our entire community benefits. By partnering with local agencies like our school district, and by focusing on school readiness (as well as other issues in Education, Income, and Health), United Way of Whatcom County is making a difference for our entire community and all of us who live here.

Right now United Way is conducting its annual campaign to raise dollars for the Community Impact Fund. I invite you to join me and make your contribution today. Pitching in and working together, we will be able to strengthen our friends and neighbors.

When I hear stories about kids learning to share for the first time or families reading together, I’m filled with excitement, because I have seen firsthand how great an impact these early learning opportunities have on kids. Having the right foundation from the beginning makes all of the difference. When we choose to work together we produce amazing changes in our community. Join me in inspiring hope and creating opportunities for a better tomorrow. That’s what it means to LIVE UNITED!

Linda Quinn
Superintendent
Ferndale School District

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