



September 2009 (October 2008 orig.)
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Submitted by Middletown

It Takes a County: Preparing Preschoolers for the “Big” School

Since the 1990s, parents and caregivers of Middletown’s preschoolers have worked together in support of high quality early childhood programs to ready its children for kindergarten. The William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund (the Memorial Fund) has been an integral partner in this initiative, which over the years expanded from Middletown into eight neighboring towns in Middlesex County. Today, these children are entering kindergarten healthier and with better social and communication skills than in years past, critical components to a successful start to school.

In 2008, the Memorial Fund along with the Middlesex United Way and others, deepened their support of that initiative. This enabled the current eight Middlesex County communities to continue their work – and the remaining seven communities of Cromwell, Durham, Middlefield, Haddam, Killingworth, Portland, and East Haddam to begin working. For the first time, these communities are working in concert to ready preschoolers for their first big year of school.

Guiding Hands from Local Councils

Local School Readiness/Early Childhood councils support and cultivate the essential collaboration between families and the community toward a common goal of improving the health and social and emotional well-being of preschoolers.

According to Christine Fahey, Middletown’s school readiness coordinator, “Volunteers join us from businesses, government, the schools, the hospital. It is the community working together for the benefit of our children. And that is why we’ve been so successful. By listening and sharing, we learn what the needs are. We set goals, develop a plan, advocate for policy changes and continually build on the learning all of us experience. The councils are the engine of change.”

Neighbors Helping Neighbors

Beyond Middletown, Clinton was one of the first eight communities in Middlesex County that served as a benchmark for the new

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towns joining the initiative. Linda Stuhlman, director of the Red Barn Children’s Center, shares a story on the impact of Clinton’s Best Beginnings program, an early identification/intervention program for children birth to five.

“A mother came to me with concerns about the development of her 18-month-old child,” says Stuhlman. “She was new to the area, as well, so she was dealing with a lot of change, and regarding her child, she was worried. I took the time to listen and then spoke with her about Clinton’s Best Beginnings – and all the resources available to her through it. Because of the program, this mom was able to ask better questions of her new pediatrician, and later, to a specialist. And she saw her child improve. Without the early intervention and the guidance that this program provided,” continues Stuhlman, “the outcome could have been dramatically different. Today, her child and her family are doing well in a community that supported them from the start.”

Mary Jo Noonan, project coordinator, Westbrook Early Childhood Council, tells the story of a single mom who was new to town and learning to speak English. “We met at Park and Rec.’s Family Day, a Westbrook event that showcases all that the community has to offer to families. Her child participated in – and really enjoyed – Park & Rec.’s Fundays, a two-day program that readies children for kindergarten.

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To keep that enthusiasm going, I connected her to Even Start, a family literacy program, as well as Head Start, a federal educational program that prepares children for kindergarten. By providing these additional resources to this mom, she felt well supported by her community. And her child began kindergarten eager to start school – and speaking English.”

Parent education and providing connections to resources, as these stories illustrate, are two of the three areas that each community must address as part of this initiative. The third is professional development for teachers, such as biannual forums, networking gatherings and professional development meetings.

Fahey admits that it’s not always easy getting preschool teachers together, due to time and budget constraints on them. “In Clinton,” remarks Stuhlman, “we often include food or vary meeting times as an incentive for directors to send their teachers and aides. It is that important.”

The Earlier, the Better

As a Middletown community-based physician, Cliff O’Callahan, M.D., Ph.D., F.A.A.P., has lived his whole life focused on community. “Whether in Guatemala, or in native American communities, or in Middletown, my life is about helping the community that I am part of do better for its children,” says O’Callahan.

As part of the pediatric faculty, family practice group and director of nurseries at Middlesex Hospital, O’Callahan plays an integral role in the Middletown initiative – and has for some time. Beyond his profession as a pediatrician, O’Callahan is also a pediatric teacher. “Preparing medical residents to take excellent care of the children in the community is essential,” remarks O’Callahan.

“From obesity and oral health to emotional and social issues, in the last five years we’ve made remarkable improvements in identifying and working with children facing these challenges,” says O’Callahan. “The American Academy of Pediatrics acknowledges proven evidence-based tools to assess children during their well-child visits and systemic screenings. So we’re identifying issues and helping children earlier than ever before. And that makes for better outcomes. Also, screenings were not previously reimbursable; now they are. This eliminates yet another barrier in providing the best care to children.”



Mary Jo Noonan (L), project coordinator, Westbrook Early Childhood Council, talks with a mother and her “early learner” at Westbrook’s Family Day in May. Photo courtesy of: Rich Annino.

To Kindergarten – and Beyond

“If a child can thrive in preschool ... and third grade ... and high school ... it is more likely that he or she will earn more and be healthier. The affects of this initiative are far reaching, benefiting the individual, which ultimately benefits society,” says O’Callahan.

“How we articulate to donors the support that’s needed for this initiative is difficult, as once a child is helped and he or she succeeds in kindergarten, the statistics indicating a problem vanish,” says Middlesex United Way’s Ed Bonilla, senior director of community resources. “But that’s not a bad problem to have, don’t you think?”

For more information, please visit the Middletown School Readiness Council Web site at www.middletownschoools.org. ■

The William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund works collaboratively to improve education for Connecticut’s children by supporting school change, informing the public debate on educational issues, and strengthening the involvement of parents and the community in education.