

Wanted: a good start

Early help less available to kids who need it most

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Based on the most recent data, approximately one out of every five members of the senior class in Hamilton County high schools will drop out before graduation. Without a high school degree, these young people will have far fewer employment options in the 21st century economy. Today, nearly one-third of Chattanooga adults without a high school degree are living in poverty.

In reality, even a high school diploma is no longer enough. While the poverty rate for high school graduates is half of the rate for dropouts, it is still more than triple the rate for college graduates. Simply put, a college degree is now the passport to the middle class. What can we do to put our children on the road to educational success and economic prosperity?

Based on years of research, we know the children who face the toughest obstacles in school. Disproportionately, they are the children of mothers who lack a high school diploma, live in low-income households, have only one parent at home, may have been born to a teenage mother or speak a language other than English at home.

Not every child who is at risk will fail. Parents and caregivers of children at risk can help them to overcome those risks. And teachers — particularly those in schools where at-risk children are in the majority — heroically work every day to help overcome these risks as well. But too often, too many children who are at risk don't succeed. They don't graduate from high school. They don't go on to college. And, increasingly, they are left out and left behind.

We know who children at risk are well before they enter a public school classroom for the first time. According to a federal Department of Education study, "Family risk factors that are associated with poor performance in school-aged children are also linked with lower proficiency in early reading and mathematics skills and general knowledge among children as they enter kindergarten."

An August 2008 Ochs Center study found that — based on those factors — one in four children in Hamilton County born every year was at risk of failing by the time he or she reached the county school system. These are children who, by the time they get to kindergarten, may already be behind. They may not know any of the letters in the alphabet or be able to count to 10. They also may have a hard time playing with others, communicating or responding to a teacher's instructions.

For these children most at risk, a growing body of research suggests that the path to educational success must begin with interventions that start at or before birth. Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman has noted, "An emerging body of evidence suggests that ... (e)nriched preschool centers available to disadvantaged children on a voluntary basis coupled with home visitation programs have a strong track record of promoting achievement for disadvantaged children."

Yet, in Hamilton County, those children most at risk of not being ready for school are among the least likely to get the types of intervention that could help them the most.

In 2009, an Ochs Center survey of more than 2,300 parents registering their children for kindergarten in Hamilton County last year found that 19.5 percent of children were beginning school without any past participation in child care or preschool programs. But children whose mothers had less than a high school education — among those most at risk of not being ready for school — were more than twice as likely (41.7 percent) not to have participated in a child care or preschool program: 28.1 percent of children of parents with a high school degree or GED had not participated

in a program, compared with just 9.5 percent of children with parents with a college degree.

The absence of intervention was greatest in a child's youngest years when so much brain development activity occurs. Between birth and the age of 3, fewer than one in five of the most at-risk children is receiving quality child care or home visitation.

Early intervention alone isn't a silver bullet. Recent studies of both the Tennessee pre-kindergarten program and the national Head Start program suggest that any advantages that at-risk children may have upon entering kindergarten as a result of early childhood intervention may dissipate by the time they complete first grade.

In other words, children at risk need both successful early interventions and quality elementary and secondary education to succeed. Research on the Harlem Children's Zone demonstrates that the combination of effective school readiness programs and quality schools can overcome achievement gaps.

So if we are serious about our state's educational "race to the top," we need to understand that for many children in Hamilton County that race begins at birth.

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