

## Early childhood education deserves added attention

### 9.6.07

OUR OPINION

SEE DICK AND JANE.

See Dick and Jane go to preschool.

See Dick sit in the corner, staring blankly. Sit. Sit. Sit.

Dick has autistic tendencies that his parents dismissed as “just a phase.” And Jane, well, Jane has undiagnosed dyslexia, which means she’ll have trouble learning to read, get teased by her classmates, decide she doesn’t like school, and grow up doubting her intelligence.

That’s not the storybook tale that most adults would recognize. But it represents a few of the realities confronting today’s day care workers, preschool instructors and elementary school teachers.

These professionals – and, yes, they should be acknowledged and paid as professionals – need to be given the know-how to identify and help children who have learning and developmental delays. They also deserve ample support from Pennsylvania’s political leaders and the children’s parents.

Recently the state approved a \$75 million increase in funding for a “Pre-K Counts” program that awards grants to preschool centers. To be eligible for the money, the center must have at least one state-certified staff member in each classroom, Mark Guydish reported in Tuesday’s edition of The Times Leader.

Similar efforts to upgrade staff training are in the works. For instance, the state’s teacher certification system might be changed, splitting the current two-tier model into three parts by 2015. Rather than lumping together all “lower grades,” separate licenses would be issued for teachers specializing in pre-kindergarten through fourth grade and teachers focusing on fourth through eighth grades. The third certification level would encompass high school grades.

Putting a sharper focus on early childhood education through training, licensing and funding makes sense. After all, by spotting a child’s learning hang-up early enough and taking action, he or she might be able to overcome the difficulty. In turn, that can translate into a better-performing student, better-paying job and better life.

And if more of the area’s children mature into productive, responsible adults, the entire community benefits.

Plenty of people and institutions in the area have been trying to drive home these points for years. King’s College set up an Early Childhood Training Institute, giving real-world experience to day care workers. Meanwhile, the United Way of Wyoming Valley has championed a “Success By 6” project, emphasizing to parents and caretakers how critically important a child’s first six years can be.

They recognize – as we all should – that reaching a happy ending depends a lot on having a good beginning.

So let’s make certain teachers and others have the tools to help preschoolers like Dick and Jane thrive.

Thrive. Thrive. Thrive.

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