

Early learning foundation of success

By Laurie Cornelius

At the 2006 Bi-State Metropolitan Forum on March 16, Washington Gov. Chris Gregoire shared her vision of education "as an aggregate whole, as a kind of seamless fabric" linking early education, K-12 and higher education systems.

As a professional in the field of early education and care at Clark College for the past 25 years, my experience is that families want to see their children succeed. Understanding how families respond to questions such as "How do you envision your child as a young adult?" and "What kinds of relationships and skills will they have and how will you prepare them?" is critical to understanding their lives and circumstances. We know that growing up is a journey of accumulated daily experiences full of wonder, exploration and investigation, as well as challenging transitions of growth and development. These accumulated experiences need to happen within environments of caring adults who support children on their way from early childhood to adulthood. But what happens when something goes amiss?

Clark County mirrors state and national trends portraying these journeys with major interruptions that keep many children and fami-

Local view

lies from achieving their dreams and prevent children from developing to their fullest potential. Families with children age 5 or older can be anywhere in this country and have access to a public education system with services. This is not true for our younger children; services are often isolated and funding is fragmented.

Research informs us that 90 percent of a child's brain is developed by the age of 5. Early experiences establish either a sturdy or a fragile foundation for all the learning and behavior that follow in later years. A recent survey of Washington state kindergarten teachers determined that only 44 percent of children are entering school ready to succeed. Once behind, most of these children are unable to catch up with their peers.

The whole child

The governor's focus on the whole child — their social, emotional, cognitive and behavioral needs by integrating physical health, literacy, special needs and mental health services that support early learning — is critical to our society's future vitality. Young children today spend time in many different environments. Families, friends and neighbors; family child-care homes; and center-

based programs all play an active role in producing healthy children, adults and communities. However, families are their children's first and primary teachers. All of our early learning services must partner with families if young children are to thrive. That message should resonate not just this week — the Week of the Young Child, April 2-8 — but every week.

Clark County Early Learning Programs and Services has been innovative in its response to the early learning crisis in our community. In 2001, six agency partners came together to form Support for Early Learning and Families, a collaboration that has grown to more than 20 partners working to improve outcomes for our youngest children. Washington state has recognized the important role local communities must play in the determination and prioritization of needs along with support for local solutions.

Washington is one of 10 states selected — and Clark County is one of eight communities selected — to initiate Born Learning, a public-awareness campaign aimed at showing parents, caregivers and child-care providers how to turn everyday moments into fun learning opportunities for children from birth through age 5. Born Learning Week will take place June 18-24 and will conclude with a special event at Esther Short Park on June 24.

As the director of Child and Family Services at Clark College, I am

Did you know?

■ On March 29, after signing a bill consolidating Washington's early learning and child care programs into the Department of Early Learning, Gov. Chris Gregoire said: "We must prepare Washington children to succeed in a global economy and, with this new department, we are making it clear that education in Washington begins long before kindergarten. Early learning is the new frontier in education, and Washington can lead the nation in quality child care and early learning programs."

excited that Clark College has committed to being a part of these collaborative efforts to improve early learning and care in our community. In our Child and Family Studies Program, we respond to research and emerging changes in the field of early childhood education. We provide professional development opportunities to our colleagues, train future caregivers, and partner with families to support their needs.

Taking an active role in the field of early childhood education, developing strategic partnerships, and designing and putting innovative strategies into place to meet changing work force demands is essential to our community's success and the welfare of our children.

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