

Success By Six is success for all
May 25, 2006 - Enquirer.com Editorial

One of the community's most visionary and effective initiatives, Success By Six, rolls out reports today that zero in on how we shortchange both our children and our future, and propose solid solutions to resolve them.

Cincinnati City Council members, Hamilton County commissioners and local legislators have been invited to today's roll-out. Nothing should keep them from attending. This is the most important "development" issue in our region.

The report Successful Starts tells us that more than half the students entering Cincinnati Public Schools are simply not ready to learn. They start out behind and stay behind, and end up at risk for self-destructive and socially expensive problems.

Here's why, according to the reports: Compared with children nationally, babies here have lower birth weights and other health complications that compromise their development and later their school performance.

Our region's poorest children often face a second hurdle: lack of quality child-care programs. Six of 10 mothers with young children work outside the home, meaning many children spend significant time in child care.

Fewer than a quarter of the programs attended by low-income children - who most need enrichment - meet the highest standards for quality child care. That means they do little to prepare children with pre-literacy skills - associating letters and sounds, learning to tell a story - or with math concepts.

That's a critical waste of learning time because the toddler years are when the brain develops most of its lifelong capacity. Enrichment activities and intellectual stimulation can not only get kids off to a good start but even make up for some developmental delays. But, as Success By Six executive director Stephanie Byrd said, "We have to get beyond the warehousing and baby-sitting of children."

So how do we address such daunting problems, which contribute to 22,000 local children being "at risk"? Success By Six has identified these key efforts:

- Expand home visitation programs, such as the highly effective Every Child Succeeds, for low-income families. By working alongside parents, these programs teach moms and dads to understand developmental stages and know what activities will help stimulate their children.
- Make quality child-care options available to low-income families. High-quality centers can "mentor" smaller centers and home-care facilities. Inexperienced staffs can receive in-service training. Scholarships can lure stronger candidates into early childhood education.

- Spread the knowledge of how children develop - especially how they learn to read. Make effective reading programs available to early childhood centers, and offer incentives to parents to reinforce such instruction.

These are proven solutions. They'll cost millions of dollars, but will save quadruple that in long-term costs. They're our best hope of improving the work force, raising employment and homeownership rates and perhaps curbing crime as well. Success by six can mean success for good, and for us all.