

Susan's Op-Ed: 8/19/07 – Sam Baker

Texas has one of the largest and fastest growing child populations in the country; over 200,000 under the age of 5, in Dallas alone. More than half of these kids spend all or part of their day in child care or preschool programs. Yet we have very little information about the how these programs really measure up.

This month, the Texas State Center for Early Childhood Development is announcing a new voluntary ratings system of sorts for preschools. To identify the top performers, the State Center tracked children from participating public school pre-k, Head Start, and child care programs through kindergarten. Those classrooms where the majority of children were at or above grade level in kindergarten will receive the "School Ready" award. Those that don't meet the grade will be eligible for training and resources designed to help them improve their outcomes.

Why are we seeing such a focus on these early programs? Doesn't real learning begin when children enter school? Do those first years really make a difference?

If you are older than 30, then you will likely remember the reading groups in your elementary school classrooms. In true west Texas style, my first grade teacher in Midland, named ours the "Roadrunners", the "Bobcats" and the "Turtles". Despite these clever monikers, we all knew the truth about what happened in those groups. The Roadrunners were reading way above grade level, the Bobcats were reading first grade books, and the Turtles were still trying to learn the alphabet.

Although this instruction was designed to get everyone reading at or above grade level, they turned out to be highly predictive of the rest of our school careers. Most Roadrunners graduated in the top ten percent of our high school class and most of the Turtles dropped out.

Teaching methods may have changed over the years, but the fact remains that children who enter school behind tend to stay behind. And educators aren't the only ones who know it. The prison systems in many states project the number of beds they'll need in 10 years based on third grade reading scores.

Thirty years ago it was still possible for high school graduates and even dropouts to get jobs that would support themselves and their families. That kind of work is scarce today. In order to compete in school and in the future job market, children need to start school with a solid foundation for continued learning. Otherwise, they may never catch up.

We know much more about how young children learn than we did a generation ago and research tells us that almost 80% of the human brain is developed by the age of four. Of course, we continue learning throughout our lives, but the underlying brain structure which supports all future learning, is largely developed in early childhood. Providing ample, developmentally appropriate learning opportunities for our youngest children

helps prepare them for school success long before they walk through the kindergarten door.

The new School Ready Certification System is a great step toward focusing resources and attention on our youngest learners and in eliminating the achievement gap before it begins. Years ago, Bob Keeshan, a long time children's advocate best known as Captain Kangaroo, said "children don't drop out of high school when they are 16, they do so in the first grade and wait 10 years to make official." We owe it to our children and to ourselves to make sure all of them have the support they need to 'pick up the pace' - and blast past the Turtle group.