Kindergarten lays foundation for a child's success

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DURHAM — For some children, kindergarten is their first taste of education and the first time they are separated from their families.

Because kindergarten is so important, the transition from life at home to school needs to be smooth, said Ken Smythe-Leistico, assistant director of the Pittsburgh University Child Development Center.

He spoke to about 100 community members this week at the Durham's Partnership for Children school readiness summit at the Durham Convention Center.

"Your first encounter with anything sets the expectations of how you will view something," Smythe-Leistico said. "Kindergarten transition is a series of events and interactions that foster relationships."

When children first come to school anxiety builds up, he explained. It's important to make sure their first encounter is friendly and fun so that the child will want to come back to school.

Many parents think high school is the most important time in a child's school years, but Smythe-Leistico said kindergarten lays the foundation for a child's success.

The more a parent is involved, the more likely a child is to succeed. Reading to children, cooking healthy meals, taking them to libraries can help improve the odds.

For some families, however, involvement can be tough, especially when parents work long hours. Early absenteeism can be a problem in some low-income families.

"Kindergarten attendance is one of the strongest early predictors of high school dropout," Smythe-Leistico said. "Even the most 'ready' children drop below proficiency by third grade if they fail to attend kindergarten."

Debbie Pittman, assistant superintendent for student, family and community services, has said the same.

"In the younger years we need to establish healthy attendance patterns of kids coming to school," she said.

"And in middle and high school when a student starts skipping class or not coming to school for unexcused reasons," she continued, "those are important and critical symptoms that need to get addressed quickly because a student can over time disconnect from school, then start to have academic challenges, then start failing classes and often times that goes along with behavior starting to manifest at school."

Parents play the biggest role in making sure students come to school, she said.

Transition to Kindergarten

Four years ago, Durham's Partnership for Children partnered with the Durham Public Schools to create a pilot program called Durham's Transition to Kindergarten.

This year the Wells Fargo gave $25,000 to the program to help establish transition teams at four schools in the district. The teams help plan and run events and to help find rising kindergarteners in the district.

For schools that don't have the transition teams, teachers at their school can apply for grants to set up transition events of their own.

At one event students and parents got to meet their teachers and tour their school. At another, parents learned what their child would be learning and got the opportunity to try to teach it to their kids themselves.

"The goal is hopefully that we can continue to spread the work in Durham so that it can become sustainable so that individual schools will be able to build it into their budget and Durham's Partnership can be a resource as well as provide support," said Wren Davisson, program coordinator.

"These parents have young kids, so we want to make them feel empowered about their child's education from the very beginning and that first day of school," she said. "The more we can get them to be empowered at their child's school at such a young age, the more a parent is going to be involved in that school for the next five years."

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