

'Peeling back the onion' on the importance of early childhood education^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

A lot goes into ensuring your children receive the best education possible, especially when you're a single parent at 21 with a 3-year-old and a 5-year-old. Even after working full-time at Urgent Care and putting herself through school to get her bachelor's in social work, Tori Furguson calls herself a "PTA mom" because she likes to stay involved with her children's schools.

Her son Cooper is 3 years old and attends Highland Heights' Learning Center Monday through Friday while Furguson works. She said the childcare center considers what the parents want for their children.

"When you walk into the daycare, they have 'what we're going to do today,' and then once you pick your child up, they have 'what we did today' so that the parents are always kept in the loop," Furguson said.

She also gets a paper sent home that shows when and what their child ate for breakfast, lunch, and a snack and what time they took their nap.

"While I'm working, I can still be in the loop of how Cooper's day went at daycare, if he didn't eat, if he has a good day or a bad day, that kind of thing. So, they're very involved, and that's what us as parents want," Furguson said.

The daycare creates a schedule for the child that they follow at the center throughout the week, which Furguson follows on the weekends to keep Cooper's daily routine. Copper was recently diagnosed with Autism, and keeping him on a schedule helps him from becoming overstimulated.

"He gets frustrated because he can't get out what he wants to say, that kind of thing. So, following that schedule definitely helps tremendously," Furguson said.

Her daughter Emma attends Kindergarten at Campbell Ridge Elementary School, where Furguson also attended. She was able to volunteer for a field trip, classroom party, and field day, the last day of school celebration, while Emma was in kindergarten.

Furguson said she thinks it is realistic right now for her to volunteer at Emma's school, but as she gets older and goes on more field trips and the classroom needs more volunteers, she doesn't see herself being able to request off work as much.

"I've been to Emma's school three times in the school year, and I think that's very doable," Furguson said. "Once she gets into first, second, third grades, and so on, I feel like it will be more unrealistic because they're older, they're going to be capable of doing more. And then I wouldn't be able to be as involved because I am a single mother, and bills do have to be paid."

Childcare Affordability

One aspect of childcare that parents can feel in their pockets is the cost.

There are options in the region to help ensure your kids receive everything they need. At Learning Grove, parents pay tuition, but those that fall (typically 160%) above the federal poverty guidelines can receive CCAP (Child Care Assistance Program), which is essentially a childcare voucher that gives them a discount on their weekly amount.

Childcare providers are not obligated to report what they are charging to the state. Exact numbers for childcare costs in Northern Kentucky are not something the state can calculate based on confidential information from families.

According to the division of childcare based on CCAP numbers in Boone, Campbell, and Kenton Counties, a licensed facility's (public center not run from the home) maximum payment for an infant/toddler for full-day care is \$47. So, the state will pay the family \$47, and the center will deduct that amount from the cost of enrollment. The amount changes based on the child's age and if it is for the whole day or part of the day. Full-day preschool-aged children receive a \$43 reimbursement, while school-age full-day children only receive \$37.

Furguson said she qualified for daycare assistance because she is a single mother, and it took her weekly cost down from \$213 a week to

\$55 a week.

"I had to budget. I actually had to get a better job because I wasn't making enough to pay my bills in a timely manner," Furguson said.

The federal poverty guideline is the dollar amount set by the U.S. government to indicate the least amount of income a person or family needs to meet their basic needs. Incomes are set every year by the Department of Health and Human Services. According to aspe.hhs.gov or The Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, two people in one household with an income of \$17,420 is below the federal poverty guidelines. You could look at that as a single parent with one child in the household. Compared to a family of four, an income of \$26,500 is below the federal poverty guidelines.

Northern Kentucky Community Action Commission (NKCAC) is another program in the region that works exclusively with families that fall within the poverty guidelines. They have 11 different locations around the area, including classrooms rooted in five local school districts, Campbell County, Kenton County, Pendleton County, Newport, and Dayton schools.

"It's not just you send your child to school, and that's it. It's the whole entire family and then working with the whole entire agency. All the services and grants can be pulled in from other departments to support all families," NKCAC Vice President for Children's Services Laurie Wolsing said.

The NKCAC centers have to be licensed by the Division of Child Care through the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services and follow the office of Head Start's guidelines. To meet the standards of their licensing, NKCAC must do things that public preschools do not, like have their children take naps and get unannounced inspections from the Division of Child Care.

Wolsing said they have a classroom in Newport Primary with a public preschool room across the hall, and the NKCAC room has to be licensed by the Division of Child Care, and the public preschool room does not.

Early childcare and child development are not just about the education aspect itself but the needs of a child that must be taken care of outside of the classroom to ensure success inside the classroom.

"Their brains are just developing at that age, and then to get them into a good high-quality setting that provides the medical, dental, the family, and education pieces are really important for their continued growth," Wolsing said.

The Head Start program, which has children 3 to 5 years old, ensure that children have their hearing, dental, and vision exams and up-to-date physicals and immunizations. The program has a health coordinator to assist families with the process. If the family can't afford to take their child for an exam, NKCAC will help find funds to support them.

"This needs to be addressed as part of school readiness, and that's our goal, to prepare the children for the kindergarten setting or the school readiness setting," Wolsing said.

NKCAC also works directly with parents to get them involved in their child's program. Parents that have children in an NKCAC program attend parent meetings to help plan center events. A parent also gets voted to be on the Policy Council, which is a requirement for NKCAC to have a council made up of parents and community members to review policy, budget, hiring, and firing.

"The hope is that they'll go on to the school or the city and join some type of committee and take a lead role in the community, so we try to prepare them for that here at Head Start," Wolsing said.

Wolsing said our region could improve on creating training that can be provided to childcare centers, Headstart, and school districts all in one. She said she would like to see everyone on one page with things like grants and not have everything separate for different programs.

Concrete vs. underlying skills

Neuroscience has shown that 90% of a child's brain is developed and formed by the age of five. Windows of opportunity are uniquely open before age five that slowly close. It doesn't mean the child will never learn specific skills, but it will be more challenging. Underlying skills like curiosity, persistence, attentiveness, drive to learn, and self-control becomes more of an influence during this time than concrete skills like letter sounds and memorization of numbers.

Considering the crucial time frame before age five, let's look at other preschool-aged children as an example. Shannon Starkey-Taylor the CEO at Learning Grove, a Northern Kentucky-based company specializing in learning experiences for children and families referenced a Learning Grove presentation by Dale C. Farran, who did a study on public preschool programs in Tennessee.

"What she (Farran) found out is that the way that we do preschool is really backward and children, especially four-year-olds, still need play-based learning, and we've taken preschool

and made it pre-K," Starkey-Taylor said. "Because of state teacher testing and requirements, we keep moving that down to third grade, second grade, and first grade. Kindergarten teachers would not say this, but they're feeling pressure even to have children read by the end of kindergarten, and that's not what we want."

In Farran's study, she referenced underlying skills as "below the iceberg skills" and concrete skills as "above the iceberg skills." The tangible skills she found to be inefficient for long-term success for children. The "below the iceberg skills" supported learning throughout the child's time in school.

"I can easily teach my kids how to count to 10 or 20, count change, count dollar bills, that kind of thing," Furguson said. "Coming from someone who works 10-hour shifts at urgent care, sometimes I don't have enough time to sit down and tell my kids this is how to act, or

this is how you're supposed to do this kind of thing/ Teachers are there to help teach the kids what we can't teach them because we don't have enough time to teach them."

Starkey-Taylor said at Learning Grove they steer away from things like school readiness which focuses more on concrete skills and less on underlying skills.

"What we've lost is what's developmentally appropriate for that age group," Starkey-Taylor said.

What questions you should be asking?

Starkey-Taylor understands early childhood education from the parent perspective and a business standpoint. She is a mother of four. She adopted all four of her children, aged 4,5,6, and 7, and applies the advice she gives to parents to her own children's education.

"I think peeling back the onion and spending time looking at the program and observing the program is really, really important," Starkey-Taylor said. "Don't just look at a five-star rating, the state of Kentucky has a school rating system, and that's a great start. But ask more questions is what I would encourage."

Questions that Starkey-Taylor encourages parents to keep in mind when looking into childcare programs are: Is there less didactic teacher-led instruction and more child-led instruction? How is the environment respecting children? Is the environment representative of a diverse group of children? Are materials broken, and is there a scarcity of them, or is there enough for children to learn? What is the amount of time they'll be playing outside? How do they handle children that might have some challenging behaviors? Do they see that as behavior issues or somewhat typical development? How much time is spent between transitions with different caregivers?

Some of her children have IEP (Individualized Education Program) needs and finding out how her childcare program handles those needs were essential.

"How do they provide for children that are on IEP? Public school is required to do certain things, but how do they interact with my child, not just, you know, check off the box that they will get speech and language services," Starkey-Taylor said. "So really pull back the curtain."

Ferguson asked the childcare center that her son attends for more progress reports after he was diagnosed with Autism.

"I was like, 'can I keep a closer eye, I haven't really been seeing anything on social media or getting sent fun things home that he's been doing,'" Ferguson said. "And literally, as soon as I said that they got right on the ball."

Examining the investment in early childhood education, Starkey-Taylor said it's not so much a regional issue as a national issue.

She said that Northern Kentucky has a lot of good foundational elements like the collaboration between programs at Learning Grove, the YMCA, Brighton Center, and the Northern Kentucky Community Action Commission. The state has a quality rating system for childcare programs, and Kentucky has a Governor's office for early childhood.

"I think where we go a little South is that sometimes our funding might go to public schools for preschool, and families need full-day, full-year childcare," Starkey-Taylor said. "So, if there's not that solution, where do parents go?"

She said we need to think about the whole family when making policy decisions. NKCAC is currently full day running from around 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Learning Grove centers provide childcare for 10 to 11 hours a day.

"It's definitely not the easiest, but it's the most rewarding," Ferguson said. "So, it's hard but then again, I know that it's all going to be for a good reason."

Region: United States [3]

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