

Experts, business leaders urge childcare support ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Nonprofit groups teamed with members of the Morris County business community Tuesday to launch a conversation about the value of investing in early childhood development in the United States.

Rebekka Zydell, executive director of the Mount Arlington-based Child & Family Resources, hosted the event at the Darress Theatre, which included a screening of the first episode in a new documentary series “The Raising of America.”

Screenings of the documentary – which explains how the United States is lagging behind other developed nations in providing financial support for working and low-income parents – are taking place across the nation this month, including every county in New Jersey.

“It is part of a national conversation to look at why investing in high-quality, early-care education is important not only from a family perspective, but from a socioeconomic perspective,” Zydell said.

“Our nation, measured across multiple dimensions of childcare support, ranks 26th out of 29 rich nations,” the documentary narrator states. “Why that is, and what we can do about it, matters.”

An economy analyst interviewed in the documentary adds that studies have shown quality early-childhood care and education can produce a “7 to 10” percent annual return on investment to the economy by producing more productive, resilient and skilled adults for the workforce.

But in the United States, the documentary argues, a lack of paid parental leave and high-quality affordable childcare, stagnant wages and overcrowded housing, depression and social exclusion and time constraints often undermine the efforts of parents and caregivers struggling to provide the nurturing environments all children need to thrive.

Groups such as Child & Family Resources – serving as the state’s child-care resource and referral organization for Morris County – try to fill in the gaps.

“Our primary role is to help improve the quality of early education in Morris County,” Zydell said. “We work with childcare centers in providing professional development to increase credentials of staff. We also work with working and low-income families who need financial assistance in paying for child care, and manage the state subsidy program for those families.”

Zydell said she hopes that with unprecedented support from the President Barack Obama administration, and the 2014 re-authorization of the Childcare Development Block Grant, the tide may be turning in favor of early childhood advocacy in America.

“Right now there’s an environment where we have both legislators and the business community recognizing the value of early care and education, and that a high-quality early childhood experience pays dividends in the long run,” Zydell said.

One example is Sen. Anthony R. Bucco, who attended the event and spoke before the screening about his efforts in Trenton, including the cosponsorship and funding of the Opportunity Scholarship Act, a pilot program in Department of Treasury that provides tax credits to taxpayers contributing to scholarships for low-income children.

“We are trying to save \$2 million in the budget this year to continue (the program) because its showing a lot of progress in making sure our children are getting the education they need,” he said. “These children are our future, and if we don’t take care of them, it becomes burdensome for the whole company.”

But government intervention will not be enough, according to John Johnson, owner of automobile dealerships in Parsippany, Rockaway and the Budd Lake section of Mount Olive.

“People tend to put pressure on the political system to solve this problem. This is not a problem that can be solved by the politicians,” said Johnson, a longtime Child & Family Resources board member. “It’s got to get solved on the grassroots level. It’s got to get solved by the small-business people and the larger business community in Morris County. If they don’t play a role, we don’t get anything done. So please,

when you leave here, let somebody know what you saw. Share it, and look for some solutions.”

The screening was followed by a discussion led by Susan O’Donnell, executive director of Head Start of Morris County, and Dr. Jeffrey Segal, a Morristown psychologist working with young patients in private practice.

The documentary is expected to air on PBS affiliates, including NJTV, but a PBS spokesperson for NJTV and WNET in New York said it has not yet been scheduled.

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