

Early Childhood Expert David Morgan

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By Kathryn Boughton



David Morgan of Litchfield. Photo by Kathryn Boughton.

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As affluent American parents know, the pre-schools their children attend can be indicators of later educational success. Poor parents know this, too. Indeed, the preparation that high-needs children get for entry into the public school system can well affect the future of those children—and even the future of our country.

“Prison officials look at performance skills in the third grade to determine what facilities they

need to build in the future,” reported David Morgan, an early childhood expert with TEAM, Inc., a nonprofit community action agency serving the lower Naugatuck Valley and Milford. “The likelihood of that child’s future can be predicted by how well he reads in the third grade.”

By those standards, Connecticut is positioned to contribute mightily to the future prison population. “Connecticut has one of the largest academic K-12 achievement gaps in the nation,” Mr. Morgan said this week, a startling revelation for a state that has long prided itself on the educational level of its labor force

He noted that, while small, Connecticut has 169 communities with varying school systems and early education possibilities, and that many of the state’s largest cities—Bridgeport, Hartford and New Haven, for example—have too few resources to serve large populations of children in need. Connecticut ranks third nationwide in the number of nationally accredited early childhood education programs, but its publicly funded programs reach less than half of the state’s high-needs children.

In Litchfield County, both Winsted and Torrington are listed as towns with critical needs.

Mr. Morgan, who lives in the Northfield section of Litchfield, who was recently appointed to Connecticut’s Early Childhood Education Cabinet, feels passionately that children in impoverished communities must be given educational support before they ever enter a public school and that their families must be empowered to feel part of the educational process.

“The cabinet’s role is to look at all the systems that serve children from birth through age 8,” he said. “There are so many organizations—Head Start, School Readiness, licensed day care centers, kith and kin providers, where a family member cares of a child—a myriad of programs and initiatives, and the question is, ‘How do we align these resources?’”

“We have 20,000 kids in Connecticut going to these programs but they are not integrated,” he continued. “Each program is in a silo.”

He said that the state must work across state agencies, public and private sectors, regions and communities to coordinate all the efforts to support young children. In particular, children and families that have never participated in the publicly subsidized early education system must be reached and encouraged to take advantage it.

Just before Mr. Morgan attended his first cabinet meeting last week, Connecticut applied for the third time for a \$50 million Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant. The grant would help the state increase the number of low-income and disadvantaged children in each age group enrolled in high-quality early learning programs, but Mr. Morgan noted that the competition is stiff, with 34 states vying for funding. “Some of them are not going to get grants,” he observed.

In its Race to the Top application, Connecticut pledged to add 1,000 quality pre-school spaces, but the state has already taken positive steps to coordinate early childhood education efforts. In 2007, it began to increase its investments in early learning and development, a trend that has continued throughout the economic downturn. Participation in School Readiness programs

increased by 35 percent from 2007 to the present and participation in state-supported child day care increased by 7 percent over the same period.

The state's funding for early learning and development programs increased 25 percent over the past four years, totaling \$306 million in 2011, a sum supplemented by private and philanthropic support. The Connecticut Early Childhood Funders Collaborative was created in 2011 in partnership with the state.

The Early Childhood Education Cabinet, originally established in 2005, was re-formed in January 2010 and was designated by former Gov. M. Jodi Rell to be the State Advisory Council specified in the Head Start Act of 2007. Its task is to develop a comprehensive system of early childhood education, and this year it developed a plan for children from birth through age 8 to be in place by July 2013.

All this is good, but the need is great and immediate: some 80,000 out of a population of 120,000 of children from birth to age 5 in Connecticut are now considered to be from low-income families or from a special needs population, or are classified as English Language Learners.

Mr. Morgan said the data is clear about the benefits of enriching a child's early education, particularly for those between birth and age 3, when language ability is forming and the child is being prepared for kindergarten. "Kindergarten is the new first grade," he said, "and the high-needs child who does not have a good pre-school experience is disadvantaged socially and environmentally. But, unfortunately, our future path is often determined by the environment we are born into."

He noted that a good pre-school program can cost \$185 a week and asked how a single mother, living at the federal poverty level of about \$14,000 a year, could ever afford to give her child this opportunity in Connecticut, which has one of the highest per capita costs of living in the nation. "Why shouldn't a mother from one of these families have the same [early childhood] educational opportunities as other families?" he asked, noting that failure to provide such services traps families in a cycle of poverty.

He said the Early Childhood Education Cabinet is charged with developing a rating system to "raise the bar" of educational experiences offered by the different programs serving these children. An integral part of that is looking at the workforce working with the children.

"Early childhood [workers] are not looked at as real professionals," he said. "It is not a field well-regarded as a profession—the job is looked at more as handing out cookies and milk. Yet the science is so clear on the benefits [of stimulating the minds of young children with pre-literacy, early math and social and emotional skills]. There is probably nothing more important than these caregivers, but they are paid an average of \$24,000 to \$28,000 a year, so they go to school, get a degree and go off to work in public schools where they can make three times as much money."

With the current economy still curtailing state spending, and the argument over federal funding in full cry, it will be a challenge to raise the compensation for early childhood caregivers enough

to make the position attractive. “The [early childhood] workforce is the biggest piece in creating change,” he said. “I’ve seen great people in these programs, but they can’t make a living—so they go to work in schools and you have to be happy for them. I want to be a change agent for these caregivers.”

The General Assembly has strengthened the educational requirements for early care teachers working for agencies that receive public funding and partners with colleges, universities and nonprofit agencies to provide a range of professional development and training opportunities for educators. Some 23 Connecticut institutions of higher education now form the Early Childhood Higher Education Consortium, with members from two- and four-year colleges.

All 12 Connecticut community colleges have early childhood education degree programs and all are working toward NAEYC Early Childhood (EC) Associate Degree Accreditation. Credentials include an infant/toddler credential, birth to 3 credential for early intervention, early childhood certificate, child development associate, teacher certification for different ages and populations (PK-3, birth to K, special education), and the director’s credential.

The success of early childhood intervention programs can be seen in Head Start, a federally funded early childhood intervention program. While some studies have questioned its efficacy because the benefits of the program “phase out” as the child progresses through the public school system, Mr. Morgan believes the program has continuing benefits in the lower drop-out rates among those who have attended Head Start.

“We do see the phase-out effect,” Mr. Morgan conceded. “The kids enter kindergarten at the same level [as their more affluent classmates]. By fourth grade the effects have begun to phase out and they begin to drop behind because they are not getting the same kind of support.”

But, he noted, to be in Head Start, the child’s family has to be at 100 percent of the federal poverty level—that’s \$14,710 for a mother or father and one child. “Imagine the stresses on that family,” he said. “They are not eating well, they are often living in large groups, bad choices may be made [by the parents] in choosing partners. For Head Start to send these children into kindergarten at the same level as others is incredible. I am not shocked that the effect phases out because the support is not there in public schools.”

Mr. Morgan knew early what he wanted to do with his life. “I grew up in Northfield and went through the Litchfield school system,” he related. “When I was in eighth grade, I had an assignment to write one of those papers about what I want to be, and I knew then I wanted to be a teacher.”

While studying Human Development and Family Relations—Early Childhood Education at UConn he discovered that he was fascinated by small children. He later earned his Master’s degree in education and is now pursuing a Sixth Year Certificate in educational leadership. He is certified to teach in kindergaren through sixth grade, a certification he sought to give him greater insight into what happens in the classroom.

He is currently vice president of early education at TEAM, Inc. He manages federal and state

Head Start programs in seven communities, as well as Child Day Care and School Readiness. Recently, he gained National Association for the Education of Young Children accreditation for all the sites, developed a Family Resource Center with private funds and is working on the implementation of a new Maternal, Infant and Early childhood Visiting Program in Ansonia and Derby. TEAM has agreements to work with five school districts.

“I am the father of three children,” he said, “and I truly understand that there is nothing more difficult than leaving your baby with someone else, but trust can build when you leave your child with a caregiver. Even a public school is a caregiver, and it opens the door for partnerships, and creates a platform to work with families, to improve positive parenting and bring parents together in forums that share child care information.”

He said many of the parents reinforced through TEAM, Inc., are very concerned with the welfare of their children, but that they need to be empowered by the schools. “Schools have to lower their facade of elitism,” he said, “and make it a more family friendly experience.”

That early childhood programs are essential and must be made even more effective is clear to Mr. Morgan, but vigilance is needed to protect them. In the prolonged struggle over the federal budget this spring, President Obama declared it imperative to support educational initiatives, but the Republicans proposed cutting Title 1 funding for reading programs by \$694 million, Head Start by \$1 billion and Pell grants for college students by \$5.6 billion. While the Obama Administration had to make uncomfortable concessions during the budget process, it did manage to protect educational funding.

He said he is pleased with the administration of Gov. Dannel Malloy. “People have never talked about this issue,” he said, “but now we have a governor who was talking about it even while he was running for office. He was the only mayor of a Connecticut city who had someone reporting to him about this. I am really excited about serving in the cabinet. I have always been passionate about the possibility of helping others.”