

Jim Yovino: Early education puts children on track to academic success

By Jim Yovino



Teacher Mary Jo Carroll hugs Colin Russo, 4, as Aracely Aguilar, 4, also plays the name game at the Reagan Elementary preschool, which merges special education and regular students. The goal is to acclimate them to each other so they can co-exist in mainstreamed classrooms. JOHN WALKER — THE FRESNO BEE |[Buy Photo](#)

When we think of early care and education, a classroom setting naturally comes to mind. Most of us recall our days as an elementary school child learning our ABCs, 123s and coloring happily outside of the lines. It's an idyllic image, the kind we all hope our children will experience.

But the quality education of our youngest students today is not simple nor should it be. It is the evolving concept of combining the best practices of the past with the diverse challenges facing the 32 school districts of Fresno County.

There is a nostalgic feeling that early childhood should be carefree of pressure or worry or want. As parents, our most-cherished hopes are for our children to thrive and be safe.

This is the shared feeling of moms and dads of every race, economic background and religion.

These dreams for our children are attainable when the roots for them are planted much earlier than perhaps realized -- with conception, throughout a mother's prenatal health and branching into the solid structure of the family and community. Early care and education is not only a classroom tenet, it is the lifeline for our children from their first breath to their first day of school and beyond.

In education-speak, we call this formative cradle of time B to 3, or birth through third grade.

At the Fresno County Office of Education, we recognize that children growing up in healthy families have a much higher chance of success. Children growing up in challenging homes where the family structure is fractured do not.

That's why we offer parenting classes to our school districts and an educational services center to teach the integral skills parents need to make a house a home. Early brain development and the capacity for knowledge start in a child long before entering a traditional classroom.

The importance of preschool cannot be denied. When a child starts school behind other students, he or she stays behind and it's a cumulative struggle to ever catch up.

Our goal is to have every school district in our county of almost 190,000 students offer preschool either on their campuses or partner with private, faith-based or family licensed child care within an accessible distance. This is especially key for those communities with poor and migrant children who most likely have even less access to the family and educational resources they need.

Along with preschool, transitional kindergarten gives our children another year in a school setting, continuing to build the nimble structures of their developing minds.

Is there an open seat available right now for every preschool-age child in our county? No, but through the dedication of our education and community partners, that gap is narrowing.

There is a vital group mindset that all students must be reading at grade level by third grade.

In Fresno County, only 37% of children entering kindergarten are deemed "ready for school," which means a child has the abilities and the knowledge to successfully learn in this grade level. Without the safety net of early care in education, this statistic does not improve as more than 14,000 students enter third grade yearly and only 45% of them exit at the end of the school year proficient in reading. This lack of readiness is the issue we all recognize and are addressing.

We know by instinct and love that parents are a child's first teacher. This isn't a complicated or expensive concept. Whether or not you are a biological parent, you can be the "parent" of any child who needs your compassion and kindness.

Take that one step further into action and notice if your neighbor's child needs school supplies, if your local library needs volunteers to read to children on a Saturday or if your neighborhood school needs you to spend an hour a month helping in your child's classroom.

The earliest care of our children is not a solo endeavor and it's so much more than pencil to paper. It is what we do together to change our community.

Now, more than ever before, our community is coming together with new initiatives and programs to support early care and education. Last September, The Children's Movement held a summit with more than 400 in attendance where increasing the number of third-graders who read at grade level was made the No. 1 priority in Fresno County.

Fresno Strive offered a Roadmap to Success, co-written by educators and business leaders, as a comprehensive education plan for children from cradle to career.

Reading and Beyond pledged its efforts to transform the Lowell neighborhood through the Promise Neighborhoods grant and the innovative Birth through Third Grade Project, involving five school districts and seven agency leads.

I invite every person with a heart for children to explore and participate in the efforts of these groups.

The cargo net of early learning must start before a child is born, continue through the development of the family and be reinforced and nurtured by every compassionate adult who can lend a hand.

Let's all put our hands together and pull our children forward into a successful future.

Jim Yovino is superintendent of the Fresno County Office of Education.

teachers,classroom,traditional,fresno,clovis,school,childhood

[Copyright](#)

© 2014 www.fresnobee.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.fresnobee.com>