

On Your Marks

A Troubling Trend in Education: Baltimore's Kids are Ill-Prepared to Learn Even Before They Get to School



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Always Be Prepared: Regina Wade (right), a leader of the Pratt Library's Mother Goose on the Loose Program, helps children and their caregivers get ready for kindergarten.

By **Christina Royster-Hemby**

There's a new disturbing education story on the rise in Baltimore City. This one, however, does not involve fires set in school buildings or multimillion deficits or administrative oversights. Rather, it's about what happens with city kids *before* they ever cross the threshold of a city school building.

Data has been emerging for the last several years showing that, by the time they are old enough to attend school, most of Baltimore's children are not equipped for kindergarten. According to the state Department of Education, only 28 percent of the city's children were prepared to enter kindergarten in the 2001-'02 school year, 32 percent were prepared in the 2002-'03 school

year, and a mere 27 percent were prepared during the 2003-'04 school year. For comparison, 55 percent of the state's children as a whole were prepared for kindergarten this year; 52 percent last year.

A student who consistently demonstrates skills, behaviors, and abilities necessary to meet kindergarten expectations successfully is considered "fully ready" to enter school, according to a state Department of Education report on school readiness released for the 2003-'04 school year. According to the Department of Education, research indicates that children's earliest learning experiences, before reaching kindergarten, set the stage for learning success later in life. State educators and leaders have been evaluating the state's kids for kindergarten preparedness since 2001 and using the information to expand the opportunities for early education to all children in Maryland. Yet Baltimore's children are not showing significant improvement in the areas considered most important by evaluators: social and personal development, mathematical thinking, language and literacy, scientific thinking, social studies, the arts, and health and physical development.

"The reason why is very complex," says Rolf Grafwallner, coordinator of the early learning office of the state Department of Education. "The data does not explain the reasons why."

Barbara Squires, speaking on behalf of the Baltimore Leadership in Action Program, which was formed last year to promote school readiness in the city, says studies have shown the importance of giving children sound learning opportunities early in life.

"We know that there are short-term implications for kids not being ready for school and long-term ones," Squires says. "The short term is that more children end up in special education or in remedial programs, so they're playing catch-up all along. The long-term implications is that we

have a lesser prepared work force and more children who get frustrated because they're not succeeding in school and drop out. Studies have shown that more of those kids wind up engaged in criminal activity. So, all the way around, the children, their families, and society winds up impacted when kids are not prepared for being successful in school."

In Baltimore, several school-readiness programs exist to arm kids and their parents with the important social, emotional, and cognitive skills needed for successful transitions to school. For example, the Kennedy Krieger Institute offers the Southeast Baltimore Early Head Start program, an early childhood development program for pregnant women and families with children from birth to 3 years old living in Southeast Baltimore. Reach Out and Read Greater Baltimore goes to pediatric primary care providers' offices and reads to children, most of whom come from low-income backgrounds, while they wait to see a doctor. The Countdown to Kindergarten Campaign offers materials to parents to educate them about preparing their children for school.

Yet another city program, at the Enoch Pratt Free Library, is taking kindergarten preparatory work to a new level. The Mother Goose on the Loose program offers children and parents training in such simple but fundamental tasks as sitting still, repeating mnemonic sounds, and recognizing word and melody patterns. The program is open to children from birth to 4 years old.

"Old Mother Goose when she wanted to wander, would fly through the air on a very fine gander," Regina Wade, a Mother Goose on the Loose leader, sings at the beginning of a Friday morning session at the Pratt Library's central branch. Throughout the 30-minute session, a group of about 10 babies and their caregivers sing nursery rhymes like "Mr. Moon" and "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star."

Though the class time may appear to be just a series of fun activities for the kids, program organizers say there is more to this curricula than meets the eye.

The National Center for Education Statistics "asked kindergarten teachers what skills were most needed for school readiness," says Betsy Diamant-Cohen, creator of the Mother Goose on the Loose program. "In the bottom 24 percent was knowing your ABCs, 123s, colors, and shapes. [At the top were] knowing how to regulate yourself, knowing how to sit and listen, paying attention, responding to a person giving directions, following directions, responding to a teacherlike figure, relating to other children, being empathetic, being able to express emotions in a positive way, feeling self-confident and capable. Once the Pratt found those statistics, we were able to make the push on early literacy."

Mother Goose on the Loose has been available to city children and families since 1999, and sessions are held at the downtown, Canton, and Hamilton library branches. The program, which serves about 125 children per month, uses nursery rhymes, movement, patterns, and other tools to stimulate young minds and bodies.

"We knew that the earlier that children start reading, the better," says Ellen Riordan, children's services coordinator for the Pratt Library. But the state and educators are trying to also address

the fact that other elements also contribute to kids' educational success. Mother Goose on the Loose tries to "incorporate a lot of the domains together," Riordan says.

For example, sorting, counting, and recognizing word patterns in songs help fulfill both mathematical and language domains. Social and motor skills are both practiced through group interactions like singing songs and using musical instruments.

Mother Goose on the Loose is "meant to be a social event with a purpose," rather than a school environment, Riordan says. "Because parents are busy, they consider this time well-used, when they can relax and play with their child. But this is something of value at the same time."

The half-hour program is run once a week all year long. Though the number of children it serves is limited right now, Riordan says it has the potential to grow. Beginning this Saturday, Nov. 13, to celebrate Children's Book Week, special engagements of "Mother Goose on the Loose" will run at the Broadway, Light Street, Cherry Hill, Edmondson, Govans, Herring Run, and Northwood library branches for one week only. But if these sessions are successful, Enoch Pratt officials say the program may expand to these sites.

While there are no studies to directly compare the number of children whose school-readiness skills have directly been impacted by this specific program, Riordan believes it's had a positive impact.

"We hope that this is encouraging families to understand the importance of reading to their children, and understanding that the seeds of learning begin at birth," she says. "It's more than just reading, it's learning."

According to the state Department of Education, programs like the one offered by the Pratt are exactly what Baltimore's kids need. "Any program that supports learning in the seven [school-readiness] domains helps a child to be ready to take advantage of formal learning," says Michael Cockey, an early learning specialist with the department. "For example . . . a program that supports a child in demonstrating self-confidence and showing initiative and self-direction and being able to manage transitions and adapt to changes in routine is helping a child be ready for formal learning experiences in school."

Cockey says that if early-childhood education programs in the city cooperate with one another, it could make a significant dent in the low percentage of city children adequately prepared to enter kindergarten.

"If all of the programs that deal with young children [in Baltimore] can align their goals to support children being ready to enter kindergarten, then these children will have a greater chance for success in school," Cockey says.