

Local leaders promote early education program

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POTTSTOWN — Local and county law enforcement officials, educators and community leaders gathered at the Pottstown Area **YMCA** Thursday to discuss the benefits of early childhood education as it pertains to both children and the communities where they live.

In particular, the benefits of the Pre-K Counts program which is a public-private partnership that gives parents the option to enroll their pre-kindergarten age child into free pre-kindergarten instruction through the Pottstown School District, were discussed.

It's a program that's enabling children to "come to kindergarten ready to achieve," said Jeff Sparagana, the director of education and human resources for Pottstown School District.

Sparagana spoke in favor of the program, indicating that for every dollar that's spent on educating children returns between \$7 and \$17.

From the educators perspective, Sparagana and Mary Rieck, the coordinator for PEAK, Pottstown Early Action for Kindergarten Readiness, explained that getting children into the classroom before they enter kindergarten makes a big difference in how well children do in kindergarten.

Rieck discussed a recent study, which four community partner sites and more than 200 children in Pottstown

(See **EARLY EDUCATION** on A3) participated in.

"The findings of the student finds that this (Pre-K Counts) is really a good investment," Rieck said. "We're very pleased and everyone in the state is very pleased about the findings."

In addition to discussing the Pre-K Counts program and what it does for children from an educational standpoint, Montgomery County District Attorney Risa Vetri Ferman and Pottstown Police Sgt. Michael Ponto were on hand to discuss the effects early childhood education has on fostering productive members of the community.

Ferman, explained that pre-kindergarten is where many children learn how to share; how not to hit; how to get along with others; how to be a part of a community.

"I'm not just a district attorney," Ferman said, "I'm a mother of three."

She said having children learn the basic lessons on kindness and sharing

"are the kinds of things that teach children how to be good people."

"If we spend the money on the front end" educating children at an early age, "we'll spend less (money) on the back-end when they come to me" if they become involved in the juvenile justice system," Ferman said.

Sgt. Ponto said when someone is arrested for committing a crime "that's a failure on someone's part."

Pre-K counts "helps had off some future 'failures'."

State Representative Thomas Quigley also took part in the discussion, adding that while government is an important part of getting funding for programs like Pre-K Counts, "government unfortunately cannot do everything" and "its good to see a private partnership step up."

There is currently \$87.5 million available for the state-wide Pre-K Counts initiative, however, Governor Rendell has proposed an additional \$12.5 million, which would serve an additional 1,000 children across the state.

Ferman and Ponto, as part of the **FIGHT CRIME: Invest in Kids** program, a state-wide anti-crime advocacy program headed by Bruce R. Clash, also read a book to a classroom of pre-kindergarten students.

Lisa Nesbitt, who has been teaching pre-kindergarten at the Pottstown YMCA for about a year, and whose students Ferman and Ponto read to Thursday, said the pre-kindergarten education is really helping a lot of children both socially and educationally.

"The program has been fabulous," she said.

Nesbitt said children who were awkward around others, not knowing how to interact with other children or being afraid of playing with others are now getting along well with other so much they look forward to coming to school. "They learn how to cooperate, how to share," Nesbitt said.

She also said students work on learning the letters of the alphabet and other elementary educational skills that will

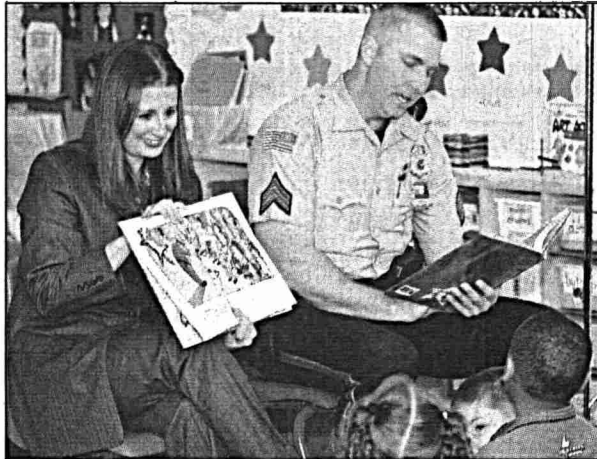


help them succeed in kindergarten.

“My 5-year-olds are definitely ready for kindergarten,” she said.

Rieck, the PEAK coordinator, reiterated the great things that Pottstown School District is doing with in their partnership to give children an early learning opportunity.

“Pottstown School District is really investing time and shows the importance of working with our program,” she said. “We have a great partnership.”



Kevin Hoffman/The Mercury

Montco District Attorney Risa Vetri Ferman and Pottstown police officer Mike Ponto read to young children at the Pottstown Area YMCA.



Kevin Hoffman/The Mercury

Montgomery County District Attorney Risa Vetri Ferman and Pottstown Police Department officer Mike Ponto read to an eager audience of children at the Pottstown Area YMCA.