

Support Infants and Toddlers in our Community, the First Step in Preventing School Drop-Outs

By Stephen J. Pearson, MD. *The Yakima Herald Republic*. July 26, 2009.



It was good to have State Superintendent Randy Dorn call attention to the huge problem of high school dropouts. As a pediatrician and long-time Yakima resident, I have seen directly how children's futures are shaped by whether they stay in school. I have witnessed the private pain as families struggle and students drop out. In the Yakima School District about seven percent of our students drop out every year. Added up over a four-year period, we lose more than one in four students before they have the chance to graduate from high school.

Superintendent Dorn has made reducing drop outs one of his top priorities. One of his key strategies is **early learning**. What, you might ask, does early learning have to do with graduating from high school? A lot, it turns out.

During the first three years of a child's life, a tremendous amount of brain growth takes place. We must not overlook this critical period of development. This is the time that children learn to understand and talk. They explore the world and learn from it. This period of time sets the stage for all of the years that follow. If children do not develop appropriate for their age, they will have catching up to do. Those who don't catch up will eventually drop out of school.

EPIC and the Washington State Migrant Council are currently Head Start and ECEAP (State preschool program) providers in Yakima County. These programs serve four-year-olds and have been shown to be effective in helping young children. What about the younger children? There are other programs that serve pregnant women and children under three, but they are underfunded. Early Head Start serves 3% or less of the eligible children under three.

What can we do in our community to help young children? **PARENTS, OTHER ADULTS, and OLDER CHILDREN**—Turn off the television and talk to your infants and toddlers. Read to them and make up stories with them. You can do this while you are fixing meals and doing chores. While you're working around the house, you can teach them names of things, colors, and numbers. Explore the world with them, and help them feel safe and loved. Get books in their hands. Take them to the library and borrow books to read to them. Sing to them and dance with them. **COMMUNITY**—Support programs that provide early learning services. **PHYSICIANS**—Encourage parents to talk to and read to their young children. Consider developing a *Reach Out and Read* Program. This program makes literacy promotion a standard part of what doctors do, so that children grow up with books and a love of reading. Across the state in the past six months alone, more than 45,000 brand new books were given to children during doctor visits as part of *Reach Out and Read*.

When Governor Christine Gregoire vetoed early learning from legislation that redefined "basic education" for Washington, she pledged to work on developing a system that would provide early learning opportunities to every child in Washington. This is a goal we all share. Let's give every infant and toddler the opportunity to succeed in life by doing our own part.