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Dr. Laura Gerald and Shenell Thompson: Let's expand access to pre-K for every child in Forsyth

Aug 11, 2024

As we start the new school year, it's exciting to have fresh evidence on the importance of Pre-K from a new pilot conducted right here in Forsyth County, funded by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and led by The Pre-K Priority.

With education funding under threat nationally and debate in our state about levels of investment in public education, this model cohort, conducted in 30 Pre-K classrooms in our area, is paving the way for success everywhere.

First-year results show that investments in pre-K educators and classrooms can have a major impact on kindergarten readiness and teacher retention. This provides a blueprint for how to improve pre-K quality and expand access for every 4-year-old, no matter their race, economic status or where they live.

As a long-time supporter, the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust is excited to help The Pre-K Priority leverage support for its model cohort. We like to call it "the power of four."

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The reality: Disparities in our education system have impacted the success of students of color in Forsyth County. More than 60% of Black and Hispanic third graders are not reading at grade level. This was the case even before the impacts of COVID-related learning loss. Our children and their teachers are not the problem here. The problem is a system that denies access to quality early childhood education for many Black and brown children, and that underpays good teachers.

The growth opportunity: After only one year of this two-year initiative, 72% of participating 4-year-olds are now on par in literacy, an 18% improvement from when they started school. The majority also increased math skills and showed growth in social emotional development. Average attendance was 89% across a majority of the cohort classrooms largely due to engaging families and translation services.

What we know: Data show that early learning experiences can have a lasting impact on brain development, from cognition to social emotional bonds. Children who enter kindergarten ready to learn are much more likely to read at or above proficiency levels by third grade. Pre-K attendees are less likely to repeat a grade or require expensive special education services and less likely to be incarcerated as adults.

We also know that not every child has access to quality Pre-K in Forsyth County. Expensive programs, long waitlists and bias keep many children — particularly children in low-income families and children of color — from accessing high-quality pre-K. That's unacceptable.

And that's why changing the system so every child in Forsyth County can attend quality, affordable pre-K extends beyond the classroom. It's about equity. It's about justice. It's about our future.

There's a lot that we as a community can learn from this pilot:

First: A successful pre-K classroom looks different than the one most grownups attended. Advancements in teaching strategies and curriculum and supports for physical and social emotional development have dramatically increased. And that's what we saw in the 30 classes in this Pre-K model cohort.

Second: There's power in the community working to change the education system. The Pre-K Priority is a grassroots coalition bringing together community organizations, business and philanthropic partners, health care organizations, the school system, faith-based groups, parents, community members and more. Everyone's working together.

Third: This effort shows the power of piloting quality learning experiences in a small number of classrooms and then expanding. This initiative is about more than improving classrooms; it's creating a stronger, more coordinated system for ensuring the success of young learners for years to come.

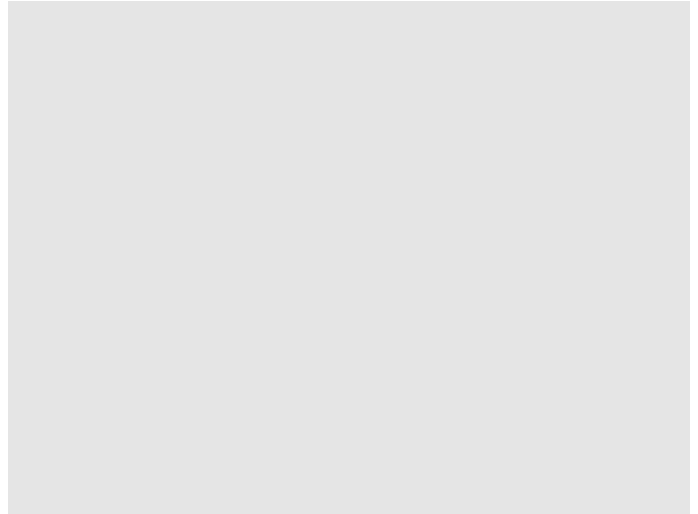
Fourth: This effort will take every one of us. The \$4 million for this cohort came from ARPA and we'll need more money to sustain and expand it after the funding runs out next year.

At the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust, we know how essential it is to leverage across government, business and philanthropy to catalyze change.

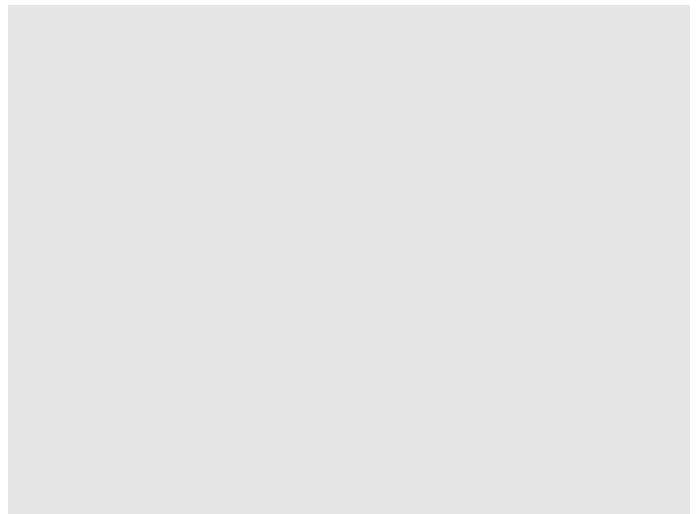
As we watch our kids get off to school this month, let's work together to increase access to high-quality pre-K for every student in our county and across North Carolina. We were the first state to make full-day kindergarten available everywhere and we can do this for pre-K.

Ready to get to work? You can start by signing The Pre-K Priority's pledge of support. The Pre-K Priority is calling for an increase in availability of high-quality pre-K programs in our community, urging state and local governments to make pre-K a budget priority, and asking elected officials to develop a plan for increasing the availability of high-quality Pre-K programs in Forsyth County.

It's going to take the power of all of us to ensure that each 4-year-old in our county will succeed. That's why we call it the power of four.



Laura Gerald



Shenell Thompson

Dr. Laura Gerald is president and Shenell Thompson is senior program officer, local impact, for the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust.