

SB 213: Early Learning Hubs

Senate Human Services and Early Childhood Committee

March 1, 2015

Chair Sara Gelser, Vice Chair Kruse and Members of the Committee,

My name is Amanda Stoltz, Kindergarten teacher at Winchester Elementary, Title 1 Public Preschool teacher and advocate for Early Learning. I am writing in support of SB 213 because my job allows me to see the huge impact the work of the Early Learning Hub does and can provide.

My positions allow me to see students and their families both before and during the transition into Kindergarten. I see children progress from the beginning of ages 4 to 6. During this short 2 years I see amazing growth in students, and am just now realizing the importance of the previous four years. In addition to teaching students, I teach 2 sets of a 3 class parenting series, Ready for K. This program is a great example of the importance of early learning from birth to Kindergarten. This also allows me to meet with parents of incoming kindergartners and inform them of Kindergarten Readiness skills and provide them with activities and materials to get "Ready for Kindergarten". Although my perspective is only a small piece of a much larger picture, it is a crucial piece in many ways. Support from SB 213 affects and will continue to affect my classroom, students, school, and community in the following ways.

School Readiness

One of the things we discuss in our Ready for K classes is how Kindergarten has changed. We now have Common Core Standards in place for all grades, which allows us, as a system of educators, to agree on what students should understand and be able to do at each grade along their school career. Although it is important to understand that each student is unique, these standards allow us to set realistic, rigorous, and attainable goals for our students, with the end result being career or college ready at graduation. This system assumes that students are entering Kindergarten with a certain set of skills that will allow them to meet the standards and to progress as expected. Only recently have we begun to assess these beginning skills; this is the second year we have administered the Kindergarten OAKS to our kindergartners. This standardized test measures a selection of readiness skills in literacy, mathematics, and approaches to learning. Next year will be our first year with Full Day Kindergarten.

This assessment shows what educators have known for years, that students enter Kindergarten at very different developmental levels, many below where the State assumes. The work of the Early Learning Hub will help all students enter Kindergarten more ready. They do this by identifying areas in early learning that need support; supporting early learning providers; facilitating networking and alignment between early learning providers; and by providing support, materials and resources to families to help them sustain academic support in their child's school career.

In my Early Learning position, we are conducting a community needs and resource assessment to identify where there may be deficits in school readiness and how to support/strengthen those areas that will allow students to enter school more successfully. The OAKS allows us to review Kindergarten readiness skills and where our students are in the state, county, district, and school when entering Kindergarten. This has also allowed us to identify things that correlate with stronger kindergarten readiness skills, such as preschool and Ready for K classes.

School readiness is something that has to be thought of at the community level. That is one reason I enjoy teaching Ready for K classes. It allows me to meet the parents of incoming students. I am able to communicate the expectations of Kindergarten with those families while they have time to prepare for this transition. Many parents are unaware of what should be expected of their child and/or how to help him or her reach these expectations. The Ready for K classes that I see are only a small fragment of the community outreach that is provided by the work of our Early Learning Hubs.

Communication and Response to Intervention

The Early Learning Hubs also allow more communication to occur among the early learning network. Communication is a great resource for our students. It allows for communications between educators, community services, and families. Only recently have I met other early learning providers. Part of the work I am doing is trying to network with other preK teachers, preschool teachers, and early learning providers to communicate about what we do in our classrooms. Hopefully we will be able to share our goals, resources, professional development, and philosophy. Having an aligned early learning realm will be more consistent and beneficial for our students. Collaboration will benefit all involved! This would not be possible without the support of our Early Learning Hub.

Communication is also being increased through the Kindergarten transition. Many times a student will be in preschool, preK, or another early learning setting and the teacher will learn much about that student, collect data, and build a relationship. However none of that is communicated to the Kindergarten teacher. We should be collecting and communicating the information that is important to support student learning.

Likewise, communication will improve response to intervention. When we are able to identify a deficit or “problem” early in a student’s life, it is much easier to accommodate and intervene. This allows us to better prepare students for school, instead of allowing the gap to widen. Providing students with the necessary interventions early is the best for the student and the education system as a whole. Many times when student begin Kindergarten behind, they stay behind. This is costly in interventions and more so in a child’s self-esteem. Identifying and providing interventions early will decrease future interventions while still maintaining and even encouraging self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Student Achievement

The most important impact of the work of the Early Learning Hubs is on the children themselves. When we proactively prepare our students for a successful entrance into Kindergarten, we are setting them up for a joyous and exciting time of learning that creates foundational skills for future grades.

The Early Learning Hubs support this successful Kindergarten transition from many different avenues. They reach out to the community and families to inform them and help them prepare for Kindergarten. They provide support and guidance to early learning providers and a way to network and collaborate with each other. They focus on all aspects of preparing a student with the necessary understanding and skills to enter Kindergarten.

I think the most important benefit, of the many that result from this work, is a student's self-efficacy and achievement. It makes sense that students who have the necessary understandings and skills are more confident when entering Kindergarten. They are academically ready to learn the content and emotionally ready to take on and persist in accomplishing challenges. This fosters a positive attitude about learning, school, and self-concept. Success is the best motivator and entering Kindergarten strong ensures that students will stay strong as they progress through further graders. We have understood for many years that it is important to be a life-long learner and that learning does not end upon graduation. It is just as, or more, important to understand that learning begins EARLY! Research shows that learning begins even prenatally! We need to foster a child's learning from birth.

In conclusion, I fully support SB 213. We often hear negative news about the education system. We hear about low scores and high dropout rates. Investing in the work of early learning is very well worth it in the long term. When students enter Kindergarten strong they learn to read quickly and well. They build the foundational reading skills that will continuously improve. Students who are at grade level reading by third grade are more likely to graduate. Not only will more of our student graduate, they will graduate with the necessary career and college readiness skills that will consequently benefit our society as a whole. Please join me in supporting SB 213 and the work and outreach of the Early Learning Hubs.

Sincerely,

Amanda Stoltz