

A Culture of Commitment to Delaware's Children

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When I got this opportunity as First Lady, I knew I wanted to work for Delaware's children, to do what I could—within this limited and, frankly, kind of weird role—to support efforts that give our children the best possible chance to reach their potential.

We know that when kids and their families face foundational challenges, each adversity deepens all of the others in a geometric—and often generational—erosion of opportunity. So to be effective and to be efficient, efforts to alleviate those challenges must also be inter-connected and mutually reinforcing. Just as that recognition inspired this DJPH issue's connection of public health to the mission of our libraries, it also inspired our Governor to revive the Family Services Cabinet Council so that various departments and agencies can collaborate more intentionally.

The recognition of interconnectedness also inspired the focus on partnerships in our first spouse initiative, First Chance Delaware, with the goal of supporting kids in a way that gives them a cohesive foundation—a true first chance to succeed. First Chance has three pillars: ending childhood hunger in Delaware (one in six Delaware children face food insecurity); building our effective recognition of, and response to, childhood trauma (half of our K-12 students have experienced at least one of the research-defined Adverse Childhood Experiences); and promoting foundational language skills to help get young kids on track for learning in school (experts recommend the equivalent of about 7,000 children's books before kindergarten). Toward that third goal, I am privileged to serve as the honorary chair of both Delaware's Dolly Parton Imagination Library program and the Delaware Library Card Campaign.

Over the last 30 years or so, thanks to research that has tracked developmental milestones over time, we've learned so much about brain development, and, fortunately for us non-experts, the lessons are pretty easy to understand. We know that exposure to oral and written language in an interactive, encouraging setting—a setting that involves a positive relationship—is a key foundation for future learning success. The quantity and quality of early language experience, from birth to three, correlates to children's academic success at ages 9 and 10 (the target of our state's grade-level reading campaign), which then correlates to the likelihood of high-school graduation, which correlates to virtually every positive outcome from then on.

We know there are particular windows of opportunity during childhood, including very early childhood, when experience can have the biggest, most natural, impact on the brain. And again, it's not just cold exposure to words, like TV, because so many interdependent foundations are developing at the same time. Kids aren't just learning the fundamentals of reading; they're learning the fundamentals of reading the world. They're learning to think, to analyze, to question, as well as to trust and to form healthy attachments. The interactive component of early literacy is essential, just as everything that strengthens the promise of a child's future depends on relationships.

Imagine if, in coordination with our expansion of the Dolly Parton Imagination Library project in Delaware, we can also expand Reach Out and Read to all of our pediatric and primary care practices. When children receive a book at well visits, from birth to age five, providers can model and give parents and caregivers tips about reading with young children, about “serve-and-

return” and similar strategies. It’s an opportunity to support caregivers who may not speak or read English well, or who may not be proficient readers, with information about how to interact using language in a variety of ways. It’s a chance to make sure caregivers know about community resources, like libraries, where they can get support in promoting early language skills. Relationships—from the front desk and phone line to treatment rooms to referrals to trusted community partners.

One of the most important lessons I’ve learned over the past three-plus years is that all successful programs for kids take advantage of the rare and precious opportunities to engage children and their caregivers at the same time. Pediatric and primary care offices—along with our research-based home visiting and community-based programs like those at libraries—are among our best bets. The multi-generation approach is not a fashion; it’s an absolute necessity if we want to make a difference in the lives of children.

A second, and related, key lesson—one that we cannot scale our way out of—is that successful programs all have a one-to-one component, responding to the specific needs and circumstances of individual children and their families. Again, pediatric and primary care and home visiting offer some of our best opportunities to see kids and families one at a time, and we have to take full advantage.

A third lesson takes us back to where we started. If we are to make real progress toward giving every child in Delaware a first chance to succeed, then collaboration is the name of the game. No single entity—no matter how well intentioned and even no matter how well funded—can do it alone. Again, the challenges are intertwined and mutually reinforcing, and so must be the solutions.

Children cannot compel our care; they don’t have a lot of leverage. Their well-being depends on our recognition of what we owe them, on our sense of obligation and responsibility. I can’t imagine a more important trust.

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