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Group Offers \$300,000 For Preschool Education

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Aim Is to Improve Quality of Fairfax Workforce

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Friday, February 3, 2006; B06

A group of Fairfax County business leaders discouraged by the poor skills of many job applicants has decided to pour hundreds of thousands of dollars into preschool education, in hopes of improving the caliber of the county's workforce.

Companies including PNC Bank, the Freddie Mac Foundation and Raytheon have launched their effort on the premise that helping more children get a better start will mean higher graduation rates, more students going to college and, ultimately, a higher-quality workforce. The businesses have donated \$300,000 to the School Readiness Network, a partnership of county agencies, businesses and community groups.

This spring, the network, which gets other funding from grants and the county, will offer English language classes and early childhood education training for 30 Spanish-speaking day-care providers in Fairfax. Another project has paired public elementary schools and child-care providers in four poor neighborhoods.

Michael N. Harreld, regional president of PNC Bank, told network members at a recent gathering in McLean that despite Fairfax's overall wealth and well-regarded public schools, his company and others in the area are struggling to hire competent workers.

"There simply are not enough people . . . capable of doing the jobs," Harreld said. "They do not all have to be PhDs. We're talking about tellers. We're talking about the mid-level of American business."

The efforts in Fairfax come during a nationwide movement to expand and improve pre-kindergarten classes aimed at helping the youngest children -- particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds -- prepare for school. In Virginia, Gov. Timothy M. Kaine (D) has proposed making preschool available to every 4-year-old in the state.

A recent Rutgers University study of five state-funded preschool programs found that participants knew more letters than their peers, improved their vocabulary and learned more math. Studies also have shown that children in high-quality early education programs require less remedial work in school, have fewer run-ins with the law and have higher earning potential as adults -- findings that have caught the attention of many U.S. business leaders.

Libby Doggett, executive director of Pre-K Now, a District-based advocacy group, said increasing numbers of business leaders are lobbying for state funding for pre-kindergarten and making contributions to support early childhood education.

"When children do better in school they have more opportunities and can get higher-paying jobs," Doggett said.

William D. Lecos, president of the Fairfax County Chamber of Commerce, a network member, said supporting early childhood education is particularly important in the Washington area, where the high-tech sector is a driving force. "We're a knowledge-based economy in Fairfax County," he said.

Fairfax School Superintendent Jack D. Dale noted that the school district -- which is serving more and more children from poor families and an increasing number who are learning to speak English -- has been working to expand full-day kindergarten. He said teachers are seeing more children who start school but haven't learned to hold a crayon, hang up a coat or use more than a very limited vocabulary. Twenty percent of the system's approximately 165,000 students live in poverty.

"Schools can and do try to level the playing field, but without significant intervention before kindergarten, it's less likely," Dale said.

The School Readiness Network grew out of a June 2004 conference, "Early Learning Is Good Business," hosted by the county.

The network is offering stipends of \$300 to \$500 to child-care providers who complete training in early childhood education.

The network will also hold a seminar for elementary school teachers and child-care providers.

Harreld said PNC traditionally has contributed to high school and college programs, but after reviewing research showing that early learning can have dramatic effects on school performance, the bank recently decided to include toddlers, too.

"It was clear that the investment here was more appropriate than anywhere else," Harreld said.

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