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Poverty puts children at risk of falling behind in school; Local politicians should consider Early Development Instrument results when making decisions, says medical officer of health

Posted By SAMANTHA CRAGGS

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Niagara preschoolers are above the national average when it comes to being ready for school, but we could always do better, early childhood officials say.

While kids up to age five are doing well compared with the rest of Canada, a closer look reveals pockets of poverty and other factors that put kids at risk of falling behind in school. That means we should not rest on our laurels, said Glory Ressler, co-ordinator of Niagara's Understanding the Early Years program, in a session with mayors and decision-makers Wednesday.

"Even if we're doing great, one in four kids (is) not prepared for school," Ressler said.

The forum examined regionwide results for the Early Development Instrument (EDI), which assesses how ready junior and senior kindergarten children are for Grade 1.

A closer look at last year's results shows anomalies in EDI results, Ressler said. Niagara-on-the-Lake, for example, has a higher average income than other areas, yet a higher percentage of preschoolers lacked the social ability to do well in school. Areas of urban St. Catharines, which have a higher percentage of families with low incomes and a first language other than English, are also red flagged as needing more attention.

Local politicians should consider EDI results when making decisions, said Dr. Robin Williams, Niagara's medical officer of health, who moderated the session.

"Overall, the Niagara story is a good news story," she said. "But one in four kids are not as ready as they could be. There's a lot of room to raise the bar higher."

The EDI assesses children in five categories: language and cognitive development, communication skills and general knowledge, social competence, emotional maturity and physical health and well-being. Tests include knowing some letters, counting to 20 and getting along with other children.

Every area of Niagara, including St. Catharines, was above the national average in last year's results. But the forum was to encourage decision-makers to dig deeper, Ressler said.

"We want to raise the understanding of the importance of investment in early years," she said.

Welland Mayor Damian Goulbourne could see where municipal investment corresponded with better results. For example, the Rose City neighbourhood with the best physical health results has the biggest park. An area red flagged has a park that has been neglected, Goulbourne said.

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"I'm just starting to get it," he said. "It wasn't until this year that I actually understood the role of social services and how it ties in with everything else."

Ressler could only speculate why Niagara-on-the-Lake's results were not as high as expected. It may be because of a migrant population whose second language is not English or French, she said. It also has only one social service agency.

"We don't have the answers," Ressler said. "This is our invitation to them to do further study."

Attendees included St. Catharines Coun. Heather Foss, Niagara-on-the-Lake Lord Mayor Gary Burroughs and District School Board of Niagara trustees. There was an afternoon session for front-line social service workers.

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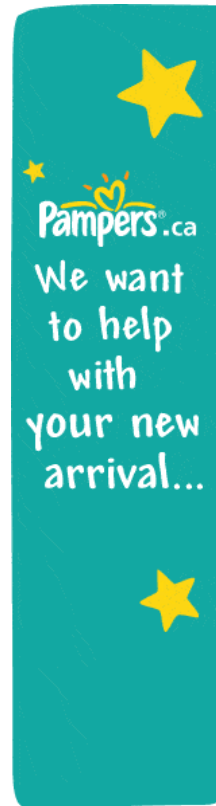
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