



Early childhood critical to later success, speakers say

By Brian Williams brian.williams@nwi.com, (219) 548-4348 | Posted: Thursday, August 12, 2010 12:00 am

WESTVILLE | If children aren't healthy, secure and learning well by the time they start kindergarten, they face obstacles to succeeding academically and socially. Those difficulties could plague them and their communities through their school careers.

That was one of the upshots Wednesday at the 2010 Early Childhood Health, Mental Health and Prevention Summer Institute held at Purdue University North Central in Westville. The conference was an initiative of the Northwest Indiana United Way Success by 6 Coalition.

The institute aimed to prepare leaders in Northwest Indiana's health, mental health and prevention communities for changes in funding resulting from the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act enacted earlier this year.

Attendees were invited to join regional teams to tackle the needs of young children in Lake, Porter and LaPorte counties.

The conference also offered advice on how to access new funding sources and influence policy at the state and federal levels.

Keynote speaker Cristal Thomas, regional director for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, said a child's brain develops fastest in his or her first five years.

For that reason, early childhood education and health are two of the most important investments for the country's future, Thomas said.

United Way of Porter County got involved in Success by 6, President Sharon Kish said, to produce the biggest impact for the agency's funding.

For every dollar spent on early childhood development, \$7 is saved in later intervention or treatment costs, Kish said. If children are ready for kindergarten and are reading at grade level by third grade, high school graduation rates increase, Kish said.

But many parents don't have the resources to meet their children's early childhood learning and health needs, said Beth Wrobel, CEO of HealthLinc health center in Valparaiso.

A 2007 Yale University study found that children in state-funded prekindergarten classrooms are expelled at a rate three times higher than that of K-12 students, hurting later chances for success. The rate is even higher at private prekindergarten programs, the study found.

But the likelihood of expulsion drops significantly when there is access to classroom-based mental health services for children with severe behavioral problems, the study found.

Such interventions are needed to ensure children are ready to learn by kindergarten, Kish said.

United Way's Success by 6 campaign seeks to create the right conditions to meet the developmental needs of children younger than 6 years old. For more information about the initiative, visit <http://www.uwsuccessby6.org/>.