



Column: District 518 takes students from early childhood to graduation

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By TARA THOMPSON, District 518

WORTHINGTON — It's graduation time! A time to reflect on where you've been and look to the future. Graduation comes with celebrations and an emotional roller coaster sometimes, too. When I look at this time, one word comes to mind: transitions. Preschool to kindergarten, elementary school to middle school, middle school to high school, high school to college — and life transitions continue to happen as time goes by.

As a coordinator of early childhood programs for District 518, I can't help but think that we truly do lay the foundation for a child's education. I certainly do hope that we have built a strong one. Early childhood programming goals consist of, but aren't limited to, the following: fostering social/emotional growth, encouraging self-help skills, physical well-being, motor development, language development, communication skills and approaches to learning (curiosity, persistence, attentiveness, reflection, interpretation, imagination and invention). Besides all the goals for the students, we also hope to help parents understand the importance of their role and how it changes over time. Once again, transitions at work! Wow, what an important job early childhood programs have — setting the stage for school and life success for students and their families.

This year approximately 194 students graduated from Worthington High School. Of the 194, I do know that around 36 of them attended District 518 early childhood programming (Early Childhood Family Education and Even Start Family Literacy). Some may have attended for a couple years. I am also sure that several other graduates attended preschool programs in the community. My hope for future graduating classes is that we have an accurate record of early childhood programs that the students participated in. This year, District 518 early childhood programs have 62 of the 195 children served moving on to kindergarten. The district is and has been working to record this information accurately. Once this is in place, the early childhood story can be told through child-level data. Right now with all the talk at the legislative session about universal pre-k, we need to be able to track these children and make programming and structural changes to meet the need to fill the gaps. Basically, what do we need to look at for data — and then, make decisions — to keep moving our students forward in today's educational system? We need to explore new ways to promote positive child health and developmental outcomes.

Quality early childhood educators know how children learn best and what is developmentally appropriate — which is not to be confused with creating what is convenient for our society.

There is a clear and direct impact between high-quality early learning and being ready for kindergarten. Children who are ready for kindergarten are much more likely to be proficient readers in the third grade, and proficient third-grade readers are more likely to graduate from high school — the basic prerequisite to a life-sustaining job.

We need to make early childhood education a foundational part of our workforce development plan in our community. I encourage you to learn about early childhood development so you can become an advocate for its expansion within our community and state. Let's commit to continuous improvement and reap the benefits with our future graduates of WHS!

Tara Thompson is District 518's early childhood coordinator.