

THE Beacon-News

Fox Valley United Way putting focus on early childhood education



A mother and son work together stacking cups at one of SPARK's "Play. Learn. Connect" events. (Fox Valley United Way)



Denise Crosby
The Beacon-News

The keynote speaker stepped up to the microphone at the annual Fox Valley [United Way Luncheon](#) last week armed with a lot of data — including line charts and number surveys — that I had doubts would be able to hold an audience of some 350 much past dessert.

But Geoffrey Nagle, president and CEO of Erikson Institute in Chicago, knew his stuff. As one of the nation's leading authorities on early childhood education, he has a list of global awards and presentations that would rival the credits rolling after any Netflix movie.

And for the last year, the local United Way has made an early childhood collaboration called SPARK Aurora its core mission. So this large audience of community leaders gathered at Pipers Banquets in Aurora had more than a little interest in what this expert had to say.

Plus, Nagle used his surveys, charts and numbers to highlight some interesting facts that included comparing the progress this country has made in germ theory to the slow evolution in how we educate our kids.

The United States, for all its leadership prowess and innovation, he noted, is falling behind, particularly in the field of early childhood education. And he backed up some dismal statistics with a chart that showed this country coming in second to last (behind only Turkey) in the amount of federal dollars that go to early childhood learning.

Nagle also caught at least a few by surprise with numbers that show our schools are doing a much better job of educating than we think, and that the real problem is in the preparation of kids before they reach kindergarten.

Generally speaking, our schools are educating poor and non-poor equally, he said. But the system is not designed to close the achievement gap they come in with when they start school.

Nagle's remarks underscore why Fox Valley United Way has dedicated its core mission to early childhood learning, and in doing so, has altered its funding model.

This gradual change began about a decade ago, said CEO Michael Meyer, when United Way groups nationwide began seeing "an erosion in workplace revenue" as more employees requested their donations go to specific charities, including their own churches or national organizations.

This reduced funding — which took a bigger hit locally with Caterpillar moving from the community — meant the money generated had to be spread thin. But it also meant this nearly 100-year-old Aurora organization was looking at its own survival.

"We were not ready to shut our doors but we saw the handwriting on the wall," said Meyer, who has been at the helm of Fox Valley United Way for a dozen years. "It was a risk, but we felt in the end, not doing something was a greater risk."

In this case, it means concentrating on an issue that officials began to notice was vital to the overall health of the Aurora community. And it turned out, Fox Valley United Way already had a proven program in place with the 2012 launch of SPARK, which stands for Strong, Prepared and Ready for Kindergarten.

A healthy community starts with the health and welfare of its children. "But we have a crisis on our hands," Meyer said, noting a state survey released last fall showed only 24 percent of Illinois kids are ready for kindergarten in three key areas: social and emotional development, language and literacy, and math.

In Kane and Kendall counties, 36 percent of children live at or below the Federal Poverty Level, he pointed out, which often restricts high quality early childhood learning.

"We also have more than 12,000 families with children under age 5 who are isolated by language barriers," Meyer said. "As a result, most don't participate in any form of preschool development, putting them at risk of being significantly behind their peers in kindergarten."

SPARK's "whole child/whole family approach," he pointed out, includes screenings to identify at-risk children and match them to programs and services; parent interaction to determine early learning placement and identify potential issues of concern; and gathering professionals and coordinating services to meet the needs of the child, from nutrition and housing to health and education.

Since its launch, Meyer said, the program has become such a success other communities are looking to it as a model. The decision was made officially a year ago to focus entirely on early learning. And on Jan. 1, the board changed its funding model so that now local United Way money goes only to organizations that assist families with children between the ages of birth to 5 years old.

According to SPARK Director Trish Rooney, Fox Valley United Way has contact with more than 40 agencies, but works intently with about 14.

"We are not there to change the work of what they are doing," she said, "but to add support to help their clients reach their full potential."

Meyer describes his organization's role as "being at the hub of bringing everybody together ... and making sure we are all going in the same direction."

From the looks of the crowded banquet room — and the way they engaged with the keynote speaker and his data — the community seems to be on that same road.

“We are excited,” Meyer said. “We have chosen a subject that resonates with people because it makes sense.”

dcrosby@tribpub.com

Twitter @dencrosby