

Annual Forum October 20, 2005
Making the Most of our Early Education Investments

PK-3 Programs

GENE MAEROFF: Edith, what would you say are the strengths and weaknesses of having programs such as yours in a school that runs up to the eighth grade?

EDITH ALLEN-COLEMAN: Space is a weakness. There are different learning styles at the different grade levels. You have the very young three-year olds and you have the budding teenagers within the same building. But you find a way to make it work because they're all family. The older children take care of the little ones and the little ones look up to the older children as role-models.

GENE MAEROFF: Jim, You made the statement that your teachers didn't appreciate what the poverty levels mean in terms of the preparation of the children and the obstacles it presented. What happened to make the teachers become more aware of the children and their families backgrounds?

JIM HINSON: Most of our teachers, in fact almost all of our teachers, come from middle-class backgrounds. We've done an extensive amount of work with Ruby Paine and her group in regard to poverty training. We've had a lot of simulation training with our teachers where they've had actually spent time in the family's home trying to make decisions that the parents are having to make for kids that are living at least 30% below the poverty level.

GENE MAEROFF: Do your principals belong to a union?

JIM HINSON: My principals belong to the Missouri Association of Elementary School Principals and the National Association. They did belong to a union when I first went to the district and they have dropped their membership.

GENE MAEROFF: How did the principals react to taking on these kinds of responsibilities from birth to five? I can imagine many principals who say, "Well, we have enough to do with the kids who are already in the school, let alone their lives before they come to school" and prefer not to have that responsibility.

JIM HINSON: I don't mean to be brash in my response but we had to educate our principals. We provided information from our own school district and found that when a child leaves us in third grade below grade level, unless it's one of those rare -exceptions or a miracle, they never catch up with their peers. And if they're reading one or more grade levels below, there's less than a 10% chance for us, historically, that they will catch up with their peers. So, we talked about how you meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind and meet the needs of students. We help our principals understand that it really takes place in our early -education. Therefore, we really didn't have any resistance or maybe very little resistance after we helped them understand what was really taking place with kids.

GENE MAEROFF: So they saw self-interest in it as well as altruism.

JIM HINSON: Yes. Self-interest, if they wanted a contract next year.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: What services does your school provide?

ADRIANA BIRNE: In Union City, we promote inclusion, be it the fact that these are babies. We try to give them the very best. We do have a self-contained classroom for children that are severely handicapped, but at the very best, they are in inclusion, as far as being serviced. Our special education teachers are in-serviced along with the other teachers, so articulation in the curriculum is in place, the same as we have in a regular classroom.

JIM HINSON: We have full inclusion also, with the exception of some infants and toddlers that have one-on-one nurses, are non-verbal, have feeding tubes, those types of issues. Other than that, it's full inclusion.

EDITH ALLEN-COLEMAN: It is the same for us. We do have full inclusion in the classrooms. In our building, our counselor is responsible for all special education practices that we have within our school. So during the staffing procedure, we make sure we provide all of the services necessary.

GENE MAEROFF: If a district does have birth to five as your district has and does a really good job in Prekindergarten and Kindergarten, it may bode well for the idea that in the long-run, fewer kids will end up in special education for the long-term.

ADRIANA BIRNE: I had a success story in one of our self-contained pre-school classrooms this past year. There were a total of five children in the classroom and this year, three of those little ones were able to begin in the inclusion kindergarten classroom. We started slowly during the summer months, with the wrap-around services, just to see how they performed during the summer, and they're doing well. So that is a little success story that we've had. Because our teachers are certified in special education, they are able to come into these classrooms and provide the services needed.