

Early learning movement stirs donors

Crowd at Vancouver luncheon pledges \$100,845 to help preschoolers

By HOWARD BUCK
Columbian staff writer

Talk about nabbing a ground-floor opportunity, or fumbling it away: Few investments pay off more than loving stimulation for youngsters whose nimble brains sponge up critical skills long before they arrive at kindergarten.

The reverse angle: If Johnny can't read well by first grade, he probably won't by fourth grade, and he is likely to struggle the rest of his school years.

Students of brain development, criminology and America's embattled education system know this, nearly 400 Clark County movers and shakers were reminded Tuesday.

Now, state and local leaders are catching on fast.

"There are windows wide open in the earliest years, and never again will they be open as wide," former Miami Herald newspaper publisher David Lawrence Jr. told the rapt Hilton Vancouver Washington audience.

"We don't need more research ... to tell us what is fundamental," he said.

Awareness has quickly grown in Washington state, where legislators voted this year to create a Department of Early Learning. The push to help preschoolers is among key education reforms spelled out in the Washington Learns package endorsed by Gov. Chris Gregoire.

And, thanks to most in the Vancouver crowd attending the Second Annual Clark County Early Learning Fund luncheon, the seeds of progress are in Southwest Washington.

At last year's inaugural event, those business, civic and education leaders rallied to the cause, writing checks worth nearly \$90,000.

Guided by the local Support and Early Learning for Families (SELF), a Clark County coalition of 20 agencies, officials leveraged that cash into \$315,323 in grants awarded to five local projects. A

huge boost came in matching dollars from the Seattle-based Foundation for Early Learning.

The money has gone to teaching parents and caregivers about emotional attachment, building quality family time, boosting infant mental health and coordinating public awareness campaigns.

Nierenbergs prompt pledges

At Tuesday's lunch, key sponsors and prolific fundraisers David and Patricia Nierenberg set a new target. David Nierenberg noted that donors contribute generously "not to a cause, but to an opportunity" to produce results. Then he joked about locked meeting room doors and his New Jersey roots.

"No one has a meal with the Nierenbergs without a shake-down," he quipped.

The crowd delivered, leaving pledges for \$100,845 this time.

Lending further help were the

2006 Clark County Early Learning Fund grant winners

■ **Promoting first relationships:** \$75,000 full funding for caregiver and family training on initial child relationships. Lead organization: Southwest Washington Child Care Consortium.

■ **Family Circle:** \$70,000 partial funding to promote family circle times in the home and to link families with other community resources. Lead organization: Children's Home Society of Washington.

■ **Born Learning Clark County:** \$61,999 full funding of public awareness campaign. Lead organization: Educational Service District 112.

■ **Community of Security:** \$75,560 full funding to train clinicians and other professionals to address infant mental health and boost public awareness. Lead organization: Columbia River Mental Health Services.

■ **Connect Local and State Efforts:** \$32,764 for provider support and education on early learning. Lead organization: Clark College.

To make tax-deductible donations

■ Send checks to: Clark County Early Learning Fund, Honoring Rick and Sarah Melching, c/o The Foundation for Early Learning, 615 Second Ave., Suite 525, Seattle, WA 98104.

For more information

■ Log on to www.earlylearning.org.

Learning:

From page C1

Ray Hickey Foundation and Vancouver couple Joe and Teresa Pauletto, each providing more matching dollars.

The Pauletto's have tutored in local schools, as do fellow parishioners at the Church of the Good Shepherd who partner with Ellsworth Elementary School. But they recognize the need for language, social and emotional skills at an even earlier age.

"We want to help the parents. They're the first teachers," Teresa Pauletto said. She's more aware now of social crises that fester where support is lacking, she said. "We've got to change something. It just blows your socks off, learning things about the importance of helping children."

Lawrence, the former long-time journalist, noted troubling parallels between Miami and Clark County in learn-

ing gaps that mean many children aren't "school ready" by age 5.

But he recounted a landmark campaign that created "universal pre-kindergarten" across Florida, increased 20-fold the number of accredited Miami child care centers and put a health care team in 77 public schools that had none.

Lawrence said the same could be done in Washington, and nationwide, if citizens are convinced they are backing "a movement, not a program" that can reach every family.

"I believe it speaks to the very future of this place," he said. Defining himself firmly as a registered political independent, he then drew loud applause with this line: "If our country can spend more than \$5 billion a month to bring democracy to Iraq, surely we can invest in the success of our own children."

HOWARD BUCK writes about schools and education. Reach him at 360-759-8015 or e-mail howard.buck@columbian.com.