

Little things affect little ones at school

Readiness reports give new insights

By MARK SCHULTZ
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Most people might guess poverty can hurt a child's chances of succeeding in school.

But toothaches?

A new initiative by Durham's Partnership for Children, for the first time, looks at a broad range of health indicators — from low birthweight to untreated tooth decay — that can affect children's ability to learn.

The partnership, which distributes state Smart Start money in Durham County, has published two report cards: A Report Card on Young Children's Health and

A School Readiness Report Card.

The reports pull together information from many sources to try to identify young children's

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needs and any gaps in local schools' ability to prepare them for academic and life success.

"We really wanted something that just looked at early childhood and just looked at Durham County," said

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Kate Irish, 30, program manager for Durham's Partnership for Children, visits a classroom at White Rock Child Development Center in Durham. The center's day care is funded by the Durham Partnership.

STAFF PHOTO BY HARRY LYNCH

CHILDREN

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Kate Irish, program and evaluation manager.

"Most people think children are ready for school if they just know their ABCs."

Children's Health

Birth to age 5 — the report cards' focus — is a critical time for brain development. Infant health, access to health care and physical activity, among other factors, all contribute to a child's readiness to learn.

Minority families have a higher rate of infant mortality and low birthweight babies than white families. Children born with extremely low birthweight are more likely to have behavior problems, learning disabilities and academic problems.

More than one in five Durham children (22.9 percent) live in poverty, according to the reports. Nearly half (45.5 percent) of Durham children up to age 5 live in low-income families, defined as 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

"That's always still startling to me," Irish said.

The partnership could not find

the number of uninsured children in Durham County. But it found nearly all infants under 1 in the county (91.8 percent) are enrolled in Medicaid and more than half under age 5 (58.9 percent) are enrolled in Medicaid.

But even less obvious health problems can affect a child's school success, said Trish Vandersea, the partnership's health care program coordinator.

Tooth decay?

Cavities are a big cause of school absences, Vandersea said.

So a child who doesn't know how to brush his teeth or who doesn't have someone to make sure he does could fall behind in class.

School readiness

Right now the partnership has a lot more information about children's health than it has about how prepared they are for school once they enroll.

The state defines students' school readiness in five areas: approaches to learning, cognitive development, emotional and social development, health and physical development, and language and communication development.

But teachers can't assess kindergartners with paper and pencil tests like older students take. So aside from basic letter identification, the ABCs, there's not a lot of data.

"We've made a lot of progress," Irish said of the partnership's new report cards. "We still have a lot of gaps."

Next steps

The agency will be discussing its next steps at a board retreat.

The partnership currently spends about half its \$8.2 million annual budget on child-care subsidies because studies show quality daycare is another contributor to children's success.

But director Marsha Basloe said the partnership can leverage its own funding by working with other groups and thinking big.

"We need to look at anything and everything that affects children," she said.

"We're a funder. We're a collaborator. We're a nudge," she said. "We're constantly stirring the pot."

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