

Preschool educators have huge influence

Numa Navarro may not know it, but he has one of the most important jobs in the country right now.

Ditto for Jen Lemelin.

They're not national economic advisers or ambassadors or political leaders.

They're teachers. Preschool teachers to be exact. And how they teach and what they teach can help shape the country.

Just ask Joan Kagan, president and CEO of Square One, an early childhood program in Springfield and Holyoke. Kagan was among those on hand recently to celebrate the success of students like Navarro and Lemelin in a grant-funded program that helps them to gain certification and higher education.

"Eighty-five percent of who you are is developed in the first five years of life," said Kagan of early education research. "It's really in those first five years that you learn how to learn."

Square One is among 39



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early education employers that have formed a partnership with eight colleges, the Preschool Enrichment Team Inc. and the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County to increase educational attainment of early childhood educators. The two-year, \$500,000 program, called Developing Early Childhood Educators, is funded through a state Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund grant and money from the Irene E. and George A. Davis Foundation.

The program aims to reduce turnover rates averaging 38 percent statewide and helps prepare instructors to meet new state requirements for advanced degrees in the years to come.

"This ambitious, two-year project will produce 185

strong advocates ready to tackle the changes in early education to meet higher quality standards of the field," said Rosemary Hernandez, who manages the program for the Regional Employment Board.

Navarro has taught art in both the Germán Gerena Community School and the New North Citizens Council preschool program in Springfield. He is following in the footsteps of his father, who was an art teacher for 25 years in his native Colombia. In his class, youngsters use watercolors and pencil to express their feelings about complex life situations that otherwise could serve as an obstacle to success.

"The kids inspire me," says Navarro.

Lemelin remembers struggling through high school herself before she was inspired by her boss, Roxanne Turowsky, owner of the Giggie Gardens pre- and after-school education program at 627 State St. in Springfield. Lemelin was among those

recognized at a breakfast there recently for completing the certification program.

She said preschool helps hook kids on lifelong learning. "They don't want to leave," she said.

Neither does she. She is already planning to obtain her associate's and master's degrees.

Patty Guenette, vice president of Human Resources at Square One, said the program helps nontraditional students who may lack self-confidence to get hooked on learning themselves. Thirty-eight percent of Square One staff are going back to school.

Richard E. Turner, director of Cambridge College – one of the institutions involved in the program – gave graduates advice on how to further their education. Debbie Flynn-Gonzalez, Family Services supervisor at Square One and an instructor at Cambridge College, said the school helps students who do not speak English as a first language to overcome that

barrier.

With the country struggling with enormous high school dropout rates in urban centers and struggling to remain a force in the global economy, early education is more important than ever. Research shows that students in early education programs are 40 percent more likely to graduate from high school, said Kagan.

That amounts to a yield of 16 percent on dollars spent, savings that will multiply in reduced societal costs for too many students who don't make the grade later on in life.

"In these tough times, research supports the return on investment," said Hernandez.

Marie P. Grady is liaison for the Literacy Works Project of the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County. For more information on the DECE program contact Program Manager Rosemary Hernandez at rhernandez@rebhc.org