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### It's time to help the littlest learners with 'learning recovery'

Like many parents, Kari Forbes is worried about the first day of school. Her daughter Kadence will attend kindergarten this fall, a landmark moment now overshadowed by COVID-19. In-person learning is particularly important for Kadence – she has a speech delay that makes online learning both stressful and challenging. “Each family and each child is different,” says Forbes, “But for my daughter, being in the classroom for preschool has been amazing.”

Like Kari and Kadence, countless families with young children are working to be ready for in-person kindergarten this fall. That means buying extra masks alongside pencils and notebooks, learning new social and emotional skills, and catching up on academic content students may have missed during online school. Much of this is accomplished by early learning programs like Kadence's preschool, which have prepared thousands of young students for the transition to kindergarten. However, [studies show](#) COVID-19 has undermined these programs on a foundational level, and experts are questioning how to get kindergarten-bound kids up to speed.

Cathy Lolley Leaver, former Director of Early Learning at Bellevue Public Schools, sees this as an opportunity gap, one that threatens to undermine the safe and supportive environments in Washington state's early learning system. She asserts that districts need to create avenues to help students, parents and families gain access to personalized resources. “Our philosophy is to use best practices for early learners,” she says. This includes social and emotional support to educate the whole child, while “realizing that tactics are customizable while they are learning.”

This is where districts like Bellevue School District are stepping in to help. Kellea Taylor, Director of Elementary Teaching and Learning at Bellevue School District, leads their “On the Way to K” summer preschool program, a strategy to provide a smooth transition from preschool to kindergarten. “This collaboration between early learning and kindergarten improves the preparedness of children, families and teachers for the upcoming school year,” she explains.

Since kindergarten is often a child's first experience in their neighborhood school, “On the Way to K” prioritizes understanding routines and building relationships with school staff and other classmates. “We want to instill an early enthusiasm for learning that will follow the students through their school career,” she says.

The program also helps parents understand home practices that can help their children thrive, according to Taylor. For example, it's meaningful to teach responsibility by assigning small tasks, later offering positive reinforcement. Reading aloud and engaging in meaningful literacy activities is important, too, and it's strongly encouraged to acknowledge your child's feelings while letting them know it's OK to feel anxious, excited and/or both.

For underserved learners, “On the Way to K” teachers take time to meet with families before the first day, which allows them to build relationships and learn about the child's interests and strengths. “Understanding what students know and can do helps teachers plan activities that will take them to the next steps of their development,” Taylor says. “This would be ideal for all teachers at all grades if we had the funding.”



Teacher Arielle Mesquita with two of her preschool students. “Learning is more than just reading and writing,” Mesquita says. “Learning can be done through play and exploring, too.”

Arielle Mesquita, lead preschool teacher at Bellevue School District, says kindergarten readiness is often associated with meeting literacy, math, cognitive and physical parameters. However, she emphasizes that the social-emotional aspect of student development truly proves the most important.

“The goal of teaching social-emotional intelligence to little ones is to have them understand their emotions,” she says. “How to cope and react to their strong emotions, and how to understand that other people have emotions that we need to respect, too. Being able to control their emotions will help them to hopefully have more success in school.”

Mesquita believes children must also learn how to cope with failure. She explains, “When a child says, ‘I can’t,’ I always say, ‘Not yet, but keep trying! Keep practicing!’ I like to remind them of the time they were just learning how to do the monkey bars or learning to write their name and how it was hard, but they practiced and practiced and now they can do it.” Each child is different, so they won’t all grasp skills at the same age. “Parents and educators need to help foster the skills and help show that learning is more than just reading and writing,” she adds. “Learning can be done through play and exploring, too.” Bellevue School District’s “On the Way to K” program uses all these techniques and more to ensure their students are kindergarten-ready come fall.

**This type of personalized instruction requires significant community support, and the Bellevue Schools Foundation is responding. As the first foundation dedicated to supporting public K-12 initiatives in Washington state, the Foundation has provided over \$2.5 million to Bellevue public schools over the past three years, which funds everything from mentoring and mental health to computer science and preschool tuition assistance.**

As Kadence prepares to start in-person kindergarten this year, her mother, Kari As Kadence prepares to start in-person kindergarten this year, her mother, Kari Forbes, reflects on the impact of “On the Way to K.” “I can say that Kadence is far more ready now than she would have been had she not attended the program,” Forbes says. Kadence feels ready, too. She has everything she needs for a successful transition to kindergarten: backpack, mask, and the confidence of an “On the Way to K” graduate.

Read the full article [here](#).

**ABOUT THE BELLEVUE SCHOOLS FOUNDATION:** The mission of the Bellevue Schools Foundation is to promote and fund the best possible learning opportunities for ALL Students in Bellevue’s public schools. For over 40 years, the Bellevue Schools Foundation has driven resources to Bellevue’s public schools, with over \$36 million contributed to date. Students enrolled in the Bellevue School District are incredibly diverse: 100 languages are spoken; 125 countries of birth are represented; and 40% of students speak a first language other than English. Bellevue Schools Foundation is particularly noteworthy for its commitment to teacher development, and 45% of Bellevue School District teachers have achieved NBCT certification through the National Board Certification for Professional Teaching Standards, an achievement that is proven to directly correlate with increased learning potential in students.

Bellevue Schools Foundation supports the dismantling of structural and systemic inequities that perpetuate both naive and intentional discrimination against persons of all races, ethnicities, religions, gender orientations, disabilities, and economic statuses. The Foundation believes that education is the basis for opportunity, growth, and success in life. The Foundation is uniquely positioned to be a catalytic agent of positive change and advancement in Bellevue’s public schools, and leverage private support to provide the high-quality education the community deserves.

To learn more about our work and/or make a contribution, click [here](#).