

IDEAS & VOICES

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COVID GENERATION: WHAT'S NEXT FOR KIDS?

The Dayton Daily News held a Community Conversation on Wednesday to discuss COVID's effects on the development of children. The discussion was co-hosted by community impact editor Nick Hrkman and investigative reporter Josh Sweigart. Panelists included: Robyn Lightcap, executive director of Preschool Promise; Shannon Cox, superintendent of the Montgomery County Educational Service Center; David Taylor, superintendent of the Dayton Early College Academy; and Dr. Katherine Lambes, a pediatrician with Community Health Centers of Greater Dayton. Community Conversations are moderated panel discussions on topics important to the Dayton region. You can read the highlights of the discussion below.

THIS TRANSCRIPT WAS EDITED FOR BREVITY AND CLARITY. YOU CAN LISTEN TO THE FULL COMMUNITY CONVERSATION ON OUR WEBSITE.

About a third of children in the youngest grades are missing reading benchmarks, up significantly from before the pandemic, according to recent studies. One study found that early reading skills were at a 20-year low this fall. Is this in line with what local educators are witnessing?

Cox: Yes, it is, and across the nation. Our earliest learners haven't had any muscle memory of what school should be like or how learning is supposed to be. While we're seeing learning loss gaps across the continuum of students, our earliest learners are experiencing a wider gap. It is something that we are very keenly aware of and we know that literacy and communication is vital. But we also know that those are the kids that we can actually catch up most quickly. There will be a lot of time, resources and dedication very intentionally placed at those early levels to ensure that we can close that gap more readily.

Childhood development experts have said that there are disparate impacts for disadvantaged communities. Black and Hispanic children, those from low-income families, those with disabilities and ESL students are falling the furthest behind. Can you talk to what we are doing as a region to address those disparities?

Lightcap: My focus area is early learning, and we've seen in our own data that our Black and brown children have been attending and participating in preschool at a lower rate during the pandemic than some of our other communities. We applied for an Ohio Department of Education grant to address some of the gaps Shannon articulated, and we applied to run a preschool program focused on Black boys in Trotwood. That's an example of something that's very targeted in its support. Our Black boys are not prioritized well in our education system, and the pandemic brought that to light. The pandemic shines a light on inequities in our system that were there long before COVID, and hopefully it lights a fire under all of us to do things differently.

Taylor: If we don't address these gaps, then we may never get them caught up. There's a lot of urgency at our school and across our region to address these issues. Some of those options include things like high dosage tutoring, where we're offering far more one-on-one or small group instruction for students around phonics instruction. We have a number of schools that are looking at radically reducing class size. We have schools extending the school day. There are community partners looking at these issues, too. One of the major constraints is workforce and finding people who are qualified to do this work and also have the bandwidth to do it. These last few years have been extraordinarily challenging for educators and for many of them even the offer of additional compensation isn't enough to entice them because there's so much burnout. They need time to rest.

Cox: It's not just the students. These barriers affect



Robyn Lightcap,
Preschool Promise
Executive Director



Shannon Cox,
Montgomery
Co. ESC
Superintendent



David Taylor,
DECA
Superintendent
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**Dr. Katherine
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Community Health
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Dayton

the entire family. Learning loss will be the least of our worries if we don't provide wrap-around services for families. The families that had the biggest challenges were the ones who were living on the fringes of our communities in the first place. They felt the impact of the pandemic more so than others. It's also important to realize that, as a community, the pandemic was not the only tragedy and trauma that we have faced over the last several years. We are still facing job loss. We have mental health needs that have skyrocketed. We are still grappling with the opioid epidemic. We know that for children's brain development, we are never going to be able to give kids what they need – whether it's catching them up, accelerating them or enriching them – if we don't have that whole human being taken care of.

Have you identified any local, state or federal resources that have been – or can be – marshaled to assist in the effort to get ahead of the COVID-related consequences for children?

Cox: If I think back to the first round of CARES dollars that came through, the education sector received \$5 million just in this county to make certain that every student had a device, that we had WiFi, etc. So there have been very targeted efforts. We're now at the stage that we can make some decisions about where we should be spending this money long-term. Do we need to provide supplemental income for teachers and tutors? We have a human capital issue and it doesn't matter how many resources you stick into the community if there aren't people to carry out the task.

Taylor: There's no shortage of think tanks providing good ideas about what to do and how to do it. Last year we were inundated with this new thing or that new thing to try. The reality is so much of what needs to happen is just good old-fashioned teaching. It's community building, it's getting kids in school on time and keeping them there all day, building connections and community within that school. We can sometimes stray away from that when the reality is we need to center in on what teachers do really well, which is educate kids in the classroom. I want to make sure we always come back to that. We need to be thinking differently about how we use technology. One of the dangers coming out of the pandemic is becoming too enamored with technology and believing that technology can replace a lot of the things that worked well in school. Typically, schools are scroung-

ing for how are they are going to fund things. Right now we can fund a number of the initiatives, but I will point out that there's a cliff coming and this is not going to be a short-term problem. We're going to be working through some of these issues and continuing to need extra support for our students for many years to come.

Cox: We have to think of these resources as investment dollars. What can we invest in today that allows us to still do the work differently when that cliff does come to bear? We've got to really think about these resources that we put into play. So if we need to enhance summer, if we need to rethink a school schedule, if we need to rethink agrarian calendars, etc. There are many of these types of things that we need to be thinking about long-term. We know that we've got to do better with literacy. We have to have adults that are trained in certain skill sets. We've got to make sure that we don't lose sight of the value of play time. If we get hyper-focused on only the academics, we're just going to exacerbate the whole human issue, the mental health issue that we have. We need to keep that whole human in perspective.

Are you familiar with any initiatives in the area that have been successful in targeting low-income and minority ZIP codes to get them vaccinated and boosted?

Lambes: I know Public Health is doing another big push. A lot of the libraries are doing walk-in vaccination clinics. I'm really excited that the numbers are going down, but we've seen the numbers go down before another wave came. We're still going to have some hot spots. We talked about this entering an endemic phase as opposed to a pandemic phase. And that's where there's not a raging big fire, but there are little fires that pop up with little outbreaks here and there, whether they're in our schools in our workplaces. Vaccination is just as important as ever. Everybody says, "Well, most people don't get too sick from it (COVID)," but I cannot predict who will get sick and who will not get sick, regardless of your health history. Every protection you can give your yourself or your child against getting long COVID symptoms is important. I'm going to give my children every protection they can get, because you don't know when you get in that "COVID car accident" whether it's going to be a minor fender bender or a serious collision. I'm going to put their "seatbelt" on every time – and that's their COVID shot.

Could you talk about some of the long-term consequences for both kids who have had COVID and those who haven't?

Lambes: As a physician, we saw wellness checks and other routine immunizations drop off significantly at the beginning of the pandemic and they're just starting to get back in for routine care. We need them to get their shots on time, but people were not scheduling. I know how hard it is with parents working multiple jobs, having childcare issues, trying to keep them in school. Health care ends up behind all of that because they've got to put food on the table and they've to get them to school.

All of these issues are exacerbated by the "Great Resignation," where you have about half of schools nationally reporting that they have vacancies in core teaching jobs – and the largest category of causes for that is resignation, not retirements. How has this played out locally and how do we plan to get ahead of it?

Taylor: We've seen more teachers this year deciding in the middle of the year that they're not going to continue anymore: "This is not for me." And not just first-year teachers, I've talked with friends in other districts who moved to new states and said, "I'm not going back for the second semester." It is incredibly difficult for schools to find an adequate replacement in the middle of the year. You're seeing people scramble to find ways to cover those jobs. This is not me bashing teachers. We're coming at this and looking at what the job has been – and it is not what people signed up for. When you have no subs in the building and you're asked to cover classes during your planning period and classrooms are split up and you're being asked to do extra duties, there's a lot that just makes the job much more difficult than it previously had been. A lot of folks will look at it and say, "What I used to do before the pandemic is not what I'm doing now, and I cannot sustain this." For a lot of them, they can get a job that will pay just as much or more, and they can work remotely. They can find a job that isn't as taxing. We would argue that it is nowhere near as rewarding. When you get to work with kids, you're doing the best work there is to do. But that doesn't necessarily hold true for everyone. We have to begin thinking differently about our pipelines, about who is going to become a teacher and what training looks like for teachers. Even pre-pandemic, we saw signifi-

cant drops in enrollment and teacher ed programs. We have to begin thinking differently about how we get educators ramped up quickly into the profession so they can be successful.

Lightcap: The childcare side of this is a whole different conversation. I'm sure all of us would advocate that educators need to be paid better. As a society, we don't value educators in the way that we should. We just did a survey with our childcare sites. The lead teacher on average makes less than \$15 an hour. The assistant teacher on average made less than \$12 an hour. That is a statement of how we're valuing the people who are teaching our kids. Unfortunately, a lot of our parents don't even know how much their child care teachers make. Our employers also have a really important role to play in how we support the whole family. Many of your employees are parents and our policies around parental leave needs serious attention, including how we handle sick days how we handle the realities of the pandemic. We have a long way to go in how we handle our policies for working parents. We don't have enough people to staff classrooms to begin with, so it's hard to think about being even more flexible. Yet until we're more flexible, we're not going to attract and retain working parents as employees and teachers.

Can you think of specific examples of programs or initiatives in our area that have been knocking it out of the park in terms of being proactive in addressing the needs of children during the pandemic?

Taylor: I'm really excited about for our city bringing Freedom Schools back. It's a summer opportunity for kids to be in school and get a lot of literacy instruction, but doing it mostly with college students. It has a strong camp feel. It is one of the things I know kids look forward to.

Lambes: I've been really pleased with how Dayton Public has been handling the pandemic with all the challenges they already face. They have reached out to parents frequently, constantly. They're thinking outside the box in terms of trying to get kids back in the classroom and help parents figure out how to do transportation and things like that, especially with bus driver shortages and the like. I think they've been doing a tremendous job.

Cox: We have an integrated social-emotional language arts curriculum that we've been using pre-pandemic and we saw that the kids who were using it did better when they used their mindfulness techniques. We partnered with singer-songwriter Jewel on that project. It's been really good to see it in use during the pandemic, but it's going to be even more important afterwards. And then the other piece is outdoor play. It's not just for the privileged to go on vacation – we have an amazing MetroParks system in this region. Please take advantage of using the outdoors as a good, natural form of self-induced therapy. Take advantage of the parks and the system that we have been so blessed with here in Dayton.