

COMMUNITY FORUM

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PHOTOS PROVIDED BY C.E. AND S. FOUNDATION

Students listen to teacher Stella Mensah as Tess McNair, right, looks on during Kindergarten Readiness Camp at the George Unsel Early Learning Center.

THE POTENTIAL OF JCPS CAMP

Youngest learners get a jump at Readiness Camp this summer

By Tess McNair

There's something very promising happening at Jefferson County Public Schools that has the potential to improve student achievement in a dramatic way — starting with our community's youngest learners and making sure they are better prepared when they arrive for their first day of kindergarten.

Over the past three years, JCPS has measured the readiness of students entering kindergarten and found that only 51 percent are deemed "ready." Even worse, only 42 percent are ready when you measure students who are eligible for free and reduced lunch — those considered "at risk" by educators. Think about it: half of our students are already behind on their first day of kindergarten.

These are children who have all the imagination, eagerness and energy that typify childhood, but they have not had the opportunities and experiences that better-resourced children have received.

JCPS is on to something — an intervention that's been tested on a small scale and is making a significant difference. Over the past two summers, JCPS has enrolled 100 at-risk students in Kindergarten Readiness Camp, and those students have shown kindergarten readiness levels that are 10 to 20 percent above the district average.

That's big news.

Children who are ready for kindergarten are much more likely to achieve the academic success that carries them through high school and college graduation and positions them to have a sustaining career in the 21st century.

The measurable success of these students points toward an intervention that holds broader potential for the district. We know our young learners and this



Mayor Greg Fischer meets children participating in the Kindergarten Readiness Camp.

program deserve a chance.

In the world of public education, finding funding for ideas — even those with merit — can be a challenge. That's where private funding is transformative. With private funding, JCPS can test the quality and scalability of high-leverage solutions to understand which should be incorporated as meaningful, systemic changes to improve our district.

The C.E. and S. Foundation recently announced a \$250,000 grant to JCPS to triple the number of at-risk students who are attending Kindergarten Readiness Camp this summer. We expect to continue to fund the expanded camp for the next two summers so more students can begin their education on stronger footing, more prepared to achieve on grade level by the third grade — a milestone we know is significant in predicting future academic success.

This grant marks the beginning of a new partnership with the Jefferson County Public Education Foundation (JCPEF) to change the relationship in Louisville between private foundations and public education with careful analysis of what works and what doesn't.

There are plans for even further growth. JCPEF has committed

to raising an additional \$1.9 million so this promising program can serve 1,000 children in two short years. We'll track the success of these children through the third grade, building a model for success for all of the district's young learners.

This program is part of a larger vision — the community's "Cradle to Career" initiative, championed by Mayor Greg Fischer. It's built on a simple and obvious observation: postsecondary education is vital to achieve a sustaining career in the 21st century. But postsecondary success depends on high school success, and high school success depends on middle school success. And so it goes all the way down to kindergarten — who is ready and who is not. We're working to make sure more kids are ready.

When our children succeed, so does our community. To achieve Louisville's potential, we must commit to ensuring children are prepared for success from the very beginning. A successful start will help deliver a promising future.

Tess McNair is executive director of The C. E. and S. Foundation, which identifies, funds and nurtures projects and organizations in the fields of education, global competency and urban environment.

A joyous day turned into mourning

After fasting for more than four weeks, Thursday was a day of celebration for millions of Muslims across America. But instead of joyous day, it became a day of mourning for Muslim communities across the country because of the brutal action of one individual.

Four marines at Chattanooga naval reserve center were killed by 24-year-old Muhammad Yousef Abdulaziz — a man who had an Islamic name but nothing in common with the majority of Muslims. In fact, Muslims who believe in values of life and liberty and its preservation have more in common with the innocent victims of this violent crime than the killer and his ideology of hatred and intolerance.

During Ramadan, a majority of 1.5 billion Muslims throughout the world strive to uplift their spirituality to become better human beings and more compassionate souls. Ramadan reminds that the main purpose of human existence is to serve ailing humanity and gives an opportunity to reflect and self-examine if this obligation is being carried out or not.

Ironically extremists and religious fanatics like Taliban and ISIS increase their brutality in this month of peace when centuries ago even pagan Arabs used to stop fighting. These terrorists who proclaim to share Islamic faith are causing waves of atrocities and terrorism across the globe. In my own land of birth, Pakistan, hundreds die every day at the hands of these ruthless killers. Terrorists are especially threatening the survival of minorities including Shiite Muslims and Christians due to their heinous crimes against humanity.

It is really heart-wrenching to be a Muslim in these trying times when we feel stuck between the barbarians who are killing endlessly in the name of our faith and the thoughtless hate mongers who label 1.5 billion of us either extremists or their sympathizers. It is difficult to understand why people who proclaim to read the same sacred text and adhere to the same faith tradition are acting in the exact opposite way that majority of peace-loving Muslims would.

It is not easy to see thousands of fellow human beings both Muslims and non-Muslims being slaughtered in the name of a faith tradition that the majority of Muslims adore so much. It is heart-breaking to witness the crimes committed in the name of Prophet Muhammad that are in dire contrast to his life. These crimes hurt Muslims millions time more than the tasteless cartoons of the Prophet drawn by fellow human beings in the name of freedom of speech.

There is so much pain and suffering around us that sometime it suffocates the life out of us. There are times when we feel helpless and lost. It seems as if all of our efforts are self-defeating against this tsunami of hatred and ignorance. It seems impossible if we will be able to turn the tide of this bloodshed and hatred in our life time.

Muslim Americans across America are working hard to build bridges in their communities by bringing people together. But if they take one step forward, acts of violence in the name of Islam push them many more steps backward. This is the irony of us Muslims as we direly need breathing room to build momentum in our peacemaking efforts both within and outside the Muslim communities.

Last week, around 600 Louisvillians shared bread together at Second Presbyterian Church in the fifth annual Interfaith Iftar Dinner. This event was arranged by Pakistani American Alliance of Compassion and Education in collaboration with Interfaith Paths to Peace to celebrate fast breaking. Attendees belonged to different walks of life, races and religions and enjoyed cherishing their similarities while accepting differences. But acts of violence put these godly activities at jeopardy and deflates the momentum of the peacemaking movement.

It is frustrating to see the inertia among Muslim religious scholars and leaders who are not heeding to the need of time and are still stuck in their centuries-old rhetoric that is in stark contrast to the true essence of Islamic faith tradition. Muslim Imams need to understand that status quo is not the solution and the onus of time is on them.

Muslims need to rise up against the extreme and brutal versions of their faith that are brain-washing Muslim youth to take human lives in the name of Islam. Outreach efforts to the youth should be the top priority to bring them close to the spirit of compassion and tolerance that is central part of mainstream Islam.

That is why today Islamic day of celebration Eid ul Fitr has become a day of reckoning and prayer for the fallen angels at Chattanooga.

Muhammad Babar of Louisville is president of the Pakistani American Alliance for Compassion and Education and a board member of the Center for Interfaith Relations, Fund for the Arts and Louisville Public Media.

READERS' FORUM

Spend on roads, education not statues

The headline "Statues of many others deserve placement in rotunda" appeared in the Community Forum section. Please, no more statues! The Commonwealth is in dire straits regarding its finances. The state's pension plan is so underfunded that, barring a huge run-up in the stock market (or a plague which kills off younger state retirees in massive numbers), the pension liabilities have no chance of ever being paid. Kentucky needs better roads and cheaper state university tuition, not more statues.

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