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Business Leaders Go Back to Preschool

Cellular pioneer John Stanton leads a home-based educational program for 2- and 3-year olds

By: Aaron Corvin



John Stanton plays with a child during a Play to Learn group session. Stanton is the chairman of the Business Partnership for Early Learning, a five-year, \$4 million program to improve preschool education. (Photo courtesy of katebaldwinphotography.com)

John Stanton talks openly and rapidly about his passions, bouncing from topic to topic, enveloping you in his knowledge of everything from politics and transportation to baseball and family.

The bookshelf at his office at Trilogy Partners the investment firm he runs in downtown Bellevue reflects his broad interests, stocked as it is with such classics as Robert Caro's Pulitzer Prize winner, *The Power Broker*. Stanton, a big fan of baseball and of not letting questions go unanswered bounds over to his desk in the middle of an interview to settle a matter of trivia, checking the Internet to confirm that Sandy Koufax, the great left-handed pitcher, did, in fact, retire in 1966.

These days, the future of children looms large in his work and life. After becoming one of the great entrepreneurs of the American wireless industry, in which he helped grow McCaw Cellular Communications and then built the cellular giants Western Wireless Corp. and Voicestream Wireless Corp., the 52-year-old Stanton is directing his life toward giving something back to the community. You've heard that one before? Stanton isn't just saying it. As chairman of the Business Partnership for Early Learning, he's backing up his words. "I want to bring the spotlight on early learning," he says.

The Business Partnership for Early Learning is a group of King County business leaders who are investing in an innovative, early-intervention program to help children develop fundamental learning skills before they begin preschool or kindergarten. Launched in 2005, the partnership is a five-year demonstration project deploying a \$4 million budget serving 400 children in the Seattle Public Schools system.

The partnership, which primarily focuses on 2- to 3-year-olds and their parents, is based on business principles of research and measurable performance. And it aids those who need it most: Almost two-thirds of the participants speak a language other than English at home, and the families are low-income and racially diverse.

What makes the partnership unique is that it meets the needs of 2- and 3-year-olds who are not being reached by more traditional programs. Instead of waiting for children to come to them, as

child care centers and preschools require, the partnership goes to the kids, sending trained visitors into homes to work with children and their parents within their neighborhoods. Backers say it's the best way to build and maintain trust and to make lasting improvements within families. "The critical period for language development in kids is starting around 18 months up through year three," says Nancy Ashley, project coordinator for the partnership.

The stakes are high. In Washington state, an estimated 75 percent of children from the lowest income families are not ready for kindergarten. That translates into disturbing differences in high school graduation rates among white students (69.8 percent), black students (49.7 percent) and Hispanic students (51.3 percent), according to the partnership's 2007 annual report. Students with limited English also show much lower graduation rates (57.7 percent).

It is neither right nor sensible for the future of business, innovation, education and employment to ignore these children, Stanton says. "These kids represent an important part of the future."

Stanton heaps credit on the people who are going to the homes and working with the families to achieve results. But his stature in the business community pays off, too. It's no accident the partnership counts among its financial backers some 20 investors, including Safeco Corp., the Boeing Co., The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and The Seattle Foundation, which manages the partnership's financial arrangements and invests the contributions it receives to support its programs. "He's so respected in the business community," Ashley says of Stanton. "He has a lot of clout and credibility and works very hard." Stanton and his wife, Theresa Gillespie, also have donated substantial money to the partnership.

The partnership houses two programs the Parent-Child Home Program and Play and Learn Groups. The Parent-Child Home Program involves weekly home visits over a two-year period during which trained visitors bring gifts of books and educational toys. The program also provides parent coaching through the modeling of behaviors designed to support a child's early learning needs, including turning off the TV and taking out a book or toy to engage a child.

The Play and Learn Groups are informal groups of children and their parents led by a trained facilitator. The idea is to improve children's social and emotional skills, reduce isolation and provide the fundamental experience of learning through play. The partnership selected two experienced, long-running Seattle area nonprofits Atlantic Street Center and Neighborhood House to deliver both programs. (The city of Seattle, through its Families and Education Levy, contracts with Southwest Youth & Family Services and will serve an additional 100 children.)

IMPRESSIVE RESULTS

The partnership's efforts are working. After two years of its programs, 95 percent of children improved in their ability to concentrate; 90 percent improved in understanding and completing activities that are developmentally appropriate; 100 percent improved in their ability to seek help when experiencing difficulty with a task; and 89 percent improved in sharing and tolerating delays in having their needs met.

In the years to come, backers hope to gain even more visibility and support to possibly expand the partnership. For now, Stanton stays focused on his mission to give back to the community. Not only is he leading the partnership, but he's also the 2007-2008 chairman of United Way of King County's fundraising campaign to end homelessness.

Stanton views his involvement in charitable efforts as the third stage in his life. In the first stage, he built his education, earning a political science degree from Whitman College and then a master's of business administration from Harvard University. In the second stage, he shot to the top of America's wireless industry. The third stage is under way. Part of it comes from his roots here: He grew up in Bellevue. He cares about the future of the region and the state. It also comes from his desire to do the right thing. And he hopes that one day the children who receive help and who find their way to success come to understand a maxim he chooses to live by because of his recognition that life and knowledge always are evolving: "Never reject wisdom because it comes late," he says, "or when it comes from someone else."

Aaron Corvin is a senior writer at Washington CEO Magazine