

Alex Area Stewards have defined thirteen key destiny drivers that will work to strengthen economic vitality for the region. Over thirteen weeks you will read about each destiny driver and its importance to the region. If you find a destiny driver that ignites your passion for the future, call the Alex Area Stewards at (320)763-4545 or visit the website at www.alexareastewards.com and become part of shaping the destiny of our region.

Title: The need for early childhood education.

Destiny Driver: Implement free early childhood programming for all 4 and 5 year old children by 2013.

Early Childhood Programming for 4 and 5 year old children has been a part of our communities in this area for more than thirty years. There are multiple private preschool programs. These programs can be found in churches, homes, child care centers, and at the Early Education Center; which collocates Head Start, a federally funded preschool program, with District 206 Early Childhood Family Education, and School Readiness. Early childhood programs in our region have a network of communication, cooperation and support through informal communication and the West Central Early Childhood Initiatives. The goal of the programs is to prepare our four and five year old children and their families for kindergarten.

Kindergarten readiness hinges on quality early education. As research continues to indicate the importance of early education, our area and school districts have increased our attention to creating more quality programs for four and five year old children. Brain development research and research on literacy indicates that children need to know 10,000 to 12,000 words in order to learn how to read. Literacy rich classrooms that provide quality books for teachers to read to the children and opportunities to handle books will increase their vocabulary. Also, parents who are children's first teachers, that model reading, play, and talk with their children at least one hour per day from birth until they are five increase children's success in school. Along with great literacy and parent child experiences, children thrive in environments that teach social skills.

Social skills are an important aspect of preschool programs. Kindergarteners can be successful if they know how to wait for their turn, get the teacher's attention appropriately, follow the classroom rules, schedule, and teacher's instructions, and begin to show respect, honesty, kindness, responsibility, and fairness to themselves, the teacher, and their classmates. Children learn social skills to prepare them for kindergarten in many different settings. One thing that all early childhood programs have in common is their love of children and capturing teachable moments as their children progress through the year. Children learn social skills and so much more in a preschool setting.

Preschool children are usually excited and sometimes apprehensive about their first "school" experience. Teachers that are knowledgeable about child development know how to make play an extremely productive learning experience. Children flourish in an environment where their learning styles are accepted and enhanced by pre academic activities. Exposure to pre-reading, pre-writing, pre-math and science experiences prepare their brains to begin to think and problem solve. Parents have the luxury of choosing which program fits for their child's first formal learning environment.

This region is lucky to have so many outstanding program choices for families. The differences in programs allow each family to decide where their child should attend according to their needs and values. All early education programs that involve parents and children are school readiness in nature as parents begin to frame a lifelong learning process for their children. Providers of early education services can offer answers to many of parent's questions regarding the upcoming days of all day every day kindergarten. It is important to celebrate all of the great programs that are available. However, to be forward thinking about what is best for children, in an ideal world, we would be providing for all who want to participate, which may include a financial commitment from the communities at large.

Next year, all of the local programs, combined will serve approximately 250 four and five year old children of the 314 possible students. This is a 55% increase in the last two years. In some of the smaller communities 100% of the children are being served. In an ideal world we would like to offer it free for all children. The cost for each program varies with the number of days and hours of service. A typical day for a four and five year old program would be anywhere from 2.5 to 4 hours, three days a week. The local communities in our region are stretching their resources as far as they can to provide service to as many children as possible. It is important to remember that how we serve our youngest learners will reflect in the lifelong learning and service they will provide for others.