Durham works to combat poverty's barriers to education

By KATIE JANSEN

According to Durham nonprofit MDC's State of the South 2014 report, just over a quarter of children under 18 in Durham County live in poverty – higher than the nation's rate of 20.8 percent.

Many in Durham see that a fourth of the county's children are in need, and programs have sprung up to try to fill the void. The East Durham Children's Initiative, a network of support systems that covers a 120-block area of East Durham, was founded in 2008 and began offering comprehensive services for children and families in 2012.

The area that receives services, or the EDCI zone, was selected carefully based on statistics.

"We chose the zone because it had the highest rates of crime, teen pregnancy, substance abuse, child abuse and neglect, the lowest performing school in the district and some of the highest rates of poverty," said David Reese, EDCI president and CEO.

EDCI focuses on channeling children through a pipeline, beginning at birth and ending with young adults who are prepared for college or a career.

And the services are working. To list a few: nurses visit homes of new mothers through Durham Connects, parent advocates help parents to be more effective and get involved in their children's education, and children enroll in summer camps so they can continue learning year-round. The data shows that the programs offered by EDCI and its community partners are making an impact.

"In our world, here, there's been tremendous change," Reese said. He cited educational successes, such as academic growth and decreased learning loss over the summer, as well as health successes, such as up-to-date immunizations.

But Reese acknowledges that in the grand scheme of things, these statistics could look like small victories.

"Does that change poverty?" he asked. "No. But what it does is it gives kids and families this fighting opportunity to have the wildest success that their minds can imagine. We still make this commitment back to families that we will work with them to make sure that their children are ready for school, ready to perform each and every day regardless of what else is happening back in the household."

But children have many needs before they even enter school.

Beginning education early

The brain develops most quickly from ages 0 to 2, said Paulette Stephens of the Durham

Partnership for Children. This crucial development period affects a child's ability to be prepared for school and to learn.

Families who live in poverty may experience more disruptions to the family unit, whether the children are forced to move frequently or whether they are left in a relative or friend's care while the parent works. Disrupted environments can create toxic stress, which can negatively affect both children's physical health and their brain development.

Laura Benson, executive director of the Durham Partnership for Children, said the Partnership's main goal is to expand access to and increase affordability of early childcare for Durham County residents, especially for those with lower incomes.

Childcare for toddlers and infants can easily cost $1,000 per month, Benson said.

"Even highly-resourced families find the cost of childcare a real burden, if not financially unfeasible," she said.

The Partnership oversees several early childcare programs, including Early Head Start, which works with pregnant women and children 0 to 3, and N.C. Pre-K, which is for 4-year- olds. The costs and eligibility requirements of the programs vary, but all of the programs make it a priority to help low-income families. The Partnership also helps administer Smart Start scholarships so that more people can afford childcare.

One of those mothers is LaDonna Allison, 39, who was born and raised in Durham and lives near Northgate Mall. Her 2-year-old daughter Zarrianna attends Durham Early Head Start.

Zarrianna was born three months early and weighed less than two pounds. Once she was able to go home from the hospital, nurses from Duke Hospital visited their home.

Allison applied for Durham Early Head Start's home-based program, in which a teacher visits a student's home weekly and students can meet for playgroups.

As Zarrianna got older, Allison began to consider daycare.

"At first I had reservations," Allison said. "I didn't want to put her in daycare at first. Because she was a preemie, and she had a little bit of delays."

Zarrianna walks with braces on her feet and also does speech, physical and occupational therapy.

But Allison's friends told her that Zarrianna needed to interact with other kids. She remembered how her son, now 20, flourished in a home daycare.

So she applied for Early Head Start's center-based program, which would allow Zarrianna to go to school.

Allison said she was lucky and didn't have to wait a long time to be accepted to either program.

Now, Zarrianna is talking more and is excited to go to school, she said.

“When she come into school, she’s just happy,” Allison said. “She goes straight to her teachers, hugs her teachers. She knows all the kids, she knows everybody’s name. Even though she can’t pronounce them real good, she knows their name…and she hugs them, they hug back, and she plays with them. She’s happy when she go there, and she loves her class and her teachers. So I’m like OK, I’m glad I did make that good decision.”

Allison is also happy with her own experience at Early Head Start. She said that the teachers send home a weekly progress update and hold monthly meetings to talk to her about what she can work on with Zarrianna.

She’s taken an even more active role in Zarrianna’s education by becoming a member of the Partnership’s parent advisory council, first as vice president and now as president. She likes that she gets to discuss things with other parents and that they get to vote on things the Partnership is doing.

Allison said she is grateful to the Partnership for making daycare affordable. The first two months that Zarrianna was in school, Allison wasn’t working and didn’t have to pay tuition. Now that she has a job working with kids with special needs, she pays $83.24 per month.

“I love it,” she said. “To me, I love their Early Head Start because they help me out. I couldn’t afford what (other places) asking for for daycare. I can’t. It is too crazy high.”

Like her daughter, Allison is also in school, taking classes online at Penn Foster to earn an associate’s degree so she can be a medical assistant and work with children with developmental delays.

Allison said she plans to continue with Early Head Start and enroll Zarrianna in N.C. Pre-K when the time comes.

“She’ll be well-prepared (for kindergarten) because she knows her numbers, colors. She’ll know how to voice her opinion – she kind of does that already – more. And she’ll be happy,” she said.

And throughout her time with Durham Partnership for Children, she knows the Partnership will be there to support her and make sure she’s satisfied with Zarrianna’s education.

“It’s a family,” Allison said. “I think it’s a family thing. And it’s great.”

The Partnership focuses on building relationships with parents, working to break down obstacles such as nontraditional work schedules or fear or mistrust of systems.

“Parents often either fear systems or have had negative experiences with systems, so how do we break down…that barrier of communication?” Stephens said. “If you help to empower parents, that helps them to feel like they have some say and are able to make a change and help to

actually spark change in their families' lives."

EDCI also is working to prevent children from falling through the cracks before they ever enter school.

EDCI hopes to launch a half-day Pre-K program in January, which will cost families $20 per month. Reese said that of the more than 1,000 kids in the EDCI zone, 62 percent have no formal childcare experience.

EDCI focuses on serving students from Y.E. Smith Elementary Museum School. The school has four kindergarten classrooms with about 20 kids apiece – but it only has one Pre-K classroom.

"Our big audacious goal, which everyone should have, is that every kid who needs Pre-K should have access to Pre-K," Reese said.

Strong parent relationships are also a big focus for EDCI.

"Kindergarten-ready parents makes for kindergarten-ready kids," Reese said.

But not all families are enjoying the benefits of childcare at reduced or no cost. As of the end of October, 694 families with 1,006 children ages 0 to 5 were still on the waitlist for financial help with childcare.

Recently, the Department of Social Services began to prioritize families to get them off the waitlist and to get affordable childcare to those who need it most.

The department also focuses on the geographic area of the EDCI zone. To qualify for a priority, a parent must be working with a child aged 0 to 5.

"We started having a conversation about how do we make the biggest impact to a population in our community that has the greatest need?" said Michael Becketts, Social Services director.

In about a year, this priority system has helped 33 families get off the waitlist and enroll in childcare, said Rhonda Stevens, assistant director for family economic independence.

Housing insecurity

Last year, 880 students in Durham Public Schools were registered as homeless.

Terrissa Jones, now 11, was one of these students. She was in fifth grade at C.C. Spaulding Elementary School when her mother, Charissa, left a domestic violence situation at home and they found themselves at Interfaith Hospitality Network, one of Durham's shelters.

Jackie Love, homeless liaison for Durham Public Schools, said that when looking at the big

picture, the number isn't as high as it sounds because there are more than 33,000 students in the school system. But she also said that the number is likely not accurate; families may not register

because they don't know their rights under federal law, and teenagers may not tell anyone they're homeless after running away from home or being kicked out.

Love also said homelessness isn't visible because it manifests in so many different ways for each child.

"I tend to look at homelessness from the whole child – how it affects them academically, how it affects their mental health, how it affects their behavior – just how it affects the entire child," she said. "You can't look at a kid and tell whether or not they're homeless," she said. "You cannot."

Charissa Jones told the staff at C.C. Spaulding that she and Terrissa were homeless so that the staff would know not to let Terrissa leave with Jones' ex-husband. She said the school responded with "open arms – anything we can do, let us know."

"They really did a lot of personal stuff for us," Jones said, citing rides to and from after-school programs and weekend shopping trips as just a couple of the nice things that administrators and teachers offered to Terrissa. "Even after we left the shelter, it didn't stop."

The numbers of homeless students are increasing by about 100 every year, both in Durham and statewide. Love said that although there is not one specific cause for the increase, she thinks more people may be willing to register as homeless once they hear about different aid programs through word of mouth.

According to federal law, a child is homeless when he or she lacks a "fixed, regular and adequate" nighttime residence. This means that people in many different situations can be considered homeless; whether kids are out sleeping in the streets, in shelters, in hotels or "doubled up" with extended family or friends, they go into the same homeless count.

Being homeless can force families to move around a lot as they search for the best hotel rate or find openings at various shelters, Love said.

Data shows that children who move around frequently can be at least four to six months behind their peers academically.

But through a federal law called the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, children don't have to move schools frequently, even if they're moving among places to live.

"The good thing about the McKinney-Vento program, it says that if a kid is homeless and moves around a lot, we have to make sure they go to their base school," Love said.

If families register as homeless, Love works with them to coordinate transportation that will get their child to school.

Although the added transportation can get very expensive, Love said "it's a district responsibility" to make sure their students are able to get to school.

McKinney-Vento does provide some federal money to districts, but this is used for after-school tutoring and transportation from tutoring, as well as hygiene products, school supplies and helping with supplemental educational opportunities like field trips.

"It's a case-by- case basis," Love said. "Anything that the kid needs to keep them academically successful, we will try to put that in place with the funding that we get from McKinney-Vento and Title I."

Jones said that teachers made sure that they sent a bag of food home with Terrissa every week – including several bags of food around Christmastime. They would also give her clothes or shoes when hers wore out.

"They take education really serious," Jones said. "They know that not just learning is a vital part of education, but also how you look, how you feel. Every day. They make sure of that every day."

Jones said that everything was offered to her free of charge, which helped during a time she was out of work, unable to return to her cosmetology business for fear of her ex-husband finding her.

And while Terrissa went to school, so did Jones, taking computer technology classes at Durham Technical Community College so she could reenter the workforce.

Durham Public Schools Superintendent Bert L'Homme said he's glad that the district is making its best effort to provide continuity in a child's school experience.

"It's so important that we continue to provide a very good education to all of our children no matter where they are or what's going on at home," he said.

However, even under federal law, there are gaps in the system.

It often takes a day to arrange transportation. If a family moves more rapidly than a bus can be sent out, the children are still forced to miss days of school.

And even when students are able to continue their education at their original school, Love said, some of them fall behind. Lack of sleep and no stable place to do homework are major contributors to this.

Jones said that with the help of people at C.C. Spaulding, Terrissa didn't really fall behind while they were living in the shelter. School employees helped not only with after-school tutoring, but also with therapy, she said.

Not only can poverty affect a student's academic performance, but it can impact his or her mental health, as well.

“There are so many factors that just affect kids in poverty that we sort of, we, as adults, gloss

over,” said Reese of EDCI. “We just assume that kids are resilient and, you know, they have these experiences and it’s fine and it didn’t really have an effect because kids just – they look resilient, right? And they just keep playing. But what we know, what data shows us and research shows us, is that these traumatic events do have an effect on kids.”

Reese said that when kids are repeat behavior problems, it doesn’t mean that they’re misbehaved. Often, it’s a behavioral health issue induced by toxic stress and resource insecurity.

To combat this, EDCI is in the process of launching a childhood mental health program. Parent advocates are currently training with experts so they can help parents effectively deal with toddlers who exhibit signs of behavioral health problems.

Love said that teachers and administrators need to be trained to know how to tease out roots of repeat behavioral offenders. Sometimes, kids just need to be asked the right questions, like “Did you eat breakfast this morning?” or “How did you sleep last night?”

Well-fed, more focused

Love is excited about the recent strides that Durham Public Schools has taken to offer free breakfast to all its students and free lunch to ten of its schools.

The free lunch program is funded by the USDA’s Community Eligibility Provision, and eligibility is determined through percentage of participation in other federal aid programs.

Love said that the program makes free school meals more universal.

“Kids – they’re hungry when they come to school – but they do not want to eat free lunch or free breakfast because there’s some negative stigma attached to eating free lunch,” she said.

Representatives from Durham Public Schools’ nutrition department said they’re going to try to bring universal free lunch to more schools next year.

Other programs have popped up through the years to make sure that children are well-fed. Church groups and other organizations commit to providing a certain number of bags weekly through a program called Backpack Buddies, which gives children a bag full of food that they can take home over the weekend.

EDCI also offers a summer lunch program so that neighborhood kids keep eating throughout the summer when they can’t receive free lunch from school.

Love said that the various nutrition programs are important because “eating healthy meals has a

direct impact on education."

She said that well-fed students are more focused. "Math class is the last thing somebody would think about when they're hungry, sick or homeless," she said. "You focus on when is your next meal coming, or where am I going to sleep tonight?"

Charter schools see problems similar to the ones present in public schools.

Healthy Start Academy's student body is 98 percent African American. Because so many of their students qualified for free and reduced lunch, they were also eligible for universal free breakfast and lunch through the Community Eligibility Provision.

"We think that it's something that contributes to kids' healthy start in the morning," said Principal Jim McCormick.

Aronda Hill, director of school-wide services at Healthy Start, said that the school is sometimes able to help out with other costs, such as school supplies and field trip costs.

"We do everything within our power to make sure our kids have no needs when it comes to school," Hill said. "We want all our kids to be successful regardless of socioeconomic background."

But even when schools are able to support students throughout their education, a catch-22 is presented upon graduation: higher education can help people pull themselves out of poverty, but for many, seeking a degree is financially far from reach.

Continuing education

Durham Technical Community College President Bill Ingram said the school is dedicated to helping make education more affordable.

"We are constantly looking for ways to further provide supports for our students who are most at risk and those in the community who need us most," he said. "We are an institution of both second chances and last resort, and we are sensitive to that."

Although tuition for Durham Tech is low, both in comparison with four-year universities and in comparison with community colleges in other states, the staff at Durham Tech recognizes that the different components of education can still add up to a financial burden.

As of July 1, 2014, in-state students were charged $72 per credit hour and out-of- state students were charged $264 per credit hour. However, charges are capped at 16 hours, even if a student is enrolled in more. This makes the maximum tuition an in-state student would have to pay for a semester $1,152; for out-of-staters, the number is $4,224.

Compare this to a four-year public college. College Board estimated that in-state students paid an

average tuition rate of $8,893 a year during the 2013-14 school year, or more than $4,000 per semester. Out-of-staters were saddled with an average bill of $22,203 a year, or more than $11,000 per semester.
The numbers show that community college is cost-effective. Andrew McCrae, who is set to graduate from Durham Tech this spring with an associate's degree in science, decided to attend community college right after graduating from high school because he couldn't afford a four-year college. He estimates that he spent less on his entire degree than he would have spent for one semester at a four-year college.

But there are other costs involved. Ingram said there are class fees, textbook costs and housing and transportation expenses to take into account.

After all these are added, Ingram estimates that it costs an in-state student roughly $15,000 per year to attend Durham Tech.

Yearly, Durham Tech submits its estimate of average cost of attendance to the N.C. Department of Education. This figure determines how much federal and state financial aid the school will be able to dole out to students. About 55 to 60 percent of students receive some form of financial aid, Ingram said.

But in addition to federal and state grants and loans, Durham Tech strives to offer other modes of assistance to its students.

Durham Tech is allotted a certain amount of federal money to offer work study opportunities, meaning that students can work to pay part of their tuition.

But in 2011, Durham Tech received local support from a sales and use tax enacted by voters. These funds were used to quadruple work study opportunities on campus, although the new positions are open exclusively to Durham residents.

This year was also the first year that the college started to target transportation costs. Ingram said that students saw transportation as one of their biggest challenges. Although the school already offered parking passes on campus for a flat fee, this year they included all-inclusive bus passes, as well. Now, students can use their bus passes during the week on any transit system – Triangle Transit, Chapel Hill Transit, DATA in Durham or Raleigh's CAT – to get to school.

"We're mindful of the fact that college is expensive for students and getting more so all the time," Ingram said.

Ingram said that tuition at North Carolina community colleges has
increased 75 percent in six years, and he expects another increase next year.

But for the students who are seeking higher education, Durham Tech hopes to make it a feasible goal.