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## The Patriot-News

### Kindergarten cultivates kids' minds

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I have a confession.

In this tell-all, too-much-information age, people desperately feel the need to spill their guts on everything from their diets to their sex lives. Nothing is sacred. So, in that spirit, I am ready to come clean on my dark and long-buried secret:

I never went to kindergarten.

I know it's hard to believe, but this was a long time ago and my parents just didn't think kindergarten was that big of a deal. (I think they didn't want me to leave home because I was the favorite, but my five siblings might disagree.)

Fortunately, that early omission didn't keep me from succeeding. I went on to finish elementary school, and even high school and college. I just hope I don't lose my job over this. (My resume was silent on the whole kindergarten thing.)

Kindergartens today cover a lot more ground than their predecessors. Instead of just playing house or learning colors, today's kindergarteners begin lifelong learning with gusto, tackling math and reading with an intensity never contemplated 30 or 40 years ago.

More and more children are also attending prekindergarten programs to help ease their transition into the regular classroom. All four of my children attended preschool. I can't say they became geniuses, but they developed a love of learning that has stayed with them.

Pre-K programs have become a political hot button. During an interview on NBC's "Today Show" yesterday, New York Sen. Hillary Clinton plugged her proposal to spend \$10 billion to provide voluntary prekindergarten for all 4-year-old children.

In his 2007-08 budget plan, Gov. Ed Rendell outlined a \$75 million investment in voluntary pre-K programs for more than 11,000 3- and 4-year-olds. The program would target children at risk for academic failure because of economic, cultural or environmental disadvantages. Pre-K Today, a coalition of more than 525 businesses and organizations statewide, supports the plan.

Advocates of the proposal argue that children exposed to preschool programs stay in school longer, perform

better academically, experience fewer behavioral problems, score higher on standardized tests and require less remediation. School districts save money in the long run, they say.

According to one Web site, children attending high-quality pre-K programs "are more likely to mature into more responsible citizens who are married, have higher educational attainment and hold better paying jobs."

Whew. It's a miracle I've gotten this far.

Opponents counter that the plan discriminates against church-affiliated programs, assists only children in certain areas and costs too much -- about \$6,800 per child. They argue the money would be better spent in higher grades.

While I'm not sure I agree with all the hyperbole linked with pre-K programs, I support increasing access to preschool for all children.

Preschool is a place where children learn to play with others, have fun outside of Mom's watchful gaze and begin to appreciate how great school can be. There are lots of successful students who never stepped inside a classroom until they turned 5 or 6. But it's likely those kids also came from safe, supportive and loving homes. For the children who don't, preschool can make a huge difference, inspiring a lifelong love of learning. And that is money well spent.

I think most of us get frustrated with the constant calls to dump more money into public schools, requests that land on the laps of homeowners in the form of higher property taxes. But too many of our children are struggling, from elementary school to high school. If we can reach little ones before they even consider failure an option, before they reach the point of no return, the investment would be wise.

Children deserve the best we can give them. If that means providing a safe place for them to learn and grow before they go to school, I support it.

In fact, I'm thinking of going back to get my PED: preschool equivalency degree.

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