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Industry, nonprofits back early education initiative

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Staff Reporter

PNC Bank, Boeing Co. and a team of charitable foundations are creating a multimillion-dollar fund aimed at improving pre-kindergarten in the region, in what organizers say is one of the area's largest-ever partnerships between corporations and nonprofits.

The goal for the initiative, tentatively titled the Early Care and Education Collaborative, is to raise at least \$1 million annually for four years, and direct that money toward improving area pre-k programs and promoting their importance to local policymakers. It will be managed by the Washington Area Women's Foundation and co-chaired by Craig Pascal, senior vice president of community development for PNC, and Tobi Printz-Platnick, program officer at the Morris & Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation. A kickoff is planned for fall.

Improving and expanding early care has been a priority for Pittsburgh-based PNC Financial Services Group Inc., the bank's parent, since 2003, when it announced a 10-year, \$100 million commitment to improving programming and advocacy to help underserved children. Much of that giving has been local; PNC made \$2.2 million in charitable gifts locally last year, fourth highest among banks, according to Washington Business Journal research. The issue makes particular sense for the company, Pascal said, because with 68 offices in the region, the bank requires a dependable pool of workers.

"We're taking a preventive, proactive approach to addressing this issue of education, so they can [be] school-ready and productive citizens. And we will have a better prepared workforce," he said.

The initiative got a jump start, Pascal said, when the \$8.4 billion W.K. Kellogg Foundation, based in Battle Creek, Mich., agreed to contribute \$200,000 per year. PNC spent \$25,000 to start the program and is committed to providing at least \$50,000 per year for the four years. Other committed funders, according to HyeSook Chung, a consultant at the women's foundation, include Chicago-based Boeing, the Cafritz foundation, CityBridge foundation and the Rocksprings Foundation. Chung said close to \$1 million has already been raised.



Joe Brier

Craig Pascal will co-chair a pre-k fund, whose backers include PNC Bank, Boeing, the Washington Area Women's Foundation and the Morris & Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation, among others.

The connection between quality pre-k and a well-educated workforce has begun to take hold with economists. A 2003 analysis by the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis found a 16 percent rate of return on money put into early education through savings in welfare payments, lower crime and increased earnings. Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke has since begun raising the issue in speeches, saying in February 2007 that the research “documented the high returns that early childhood programs can pay in terms of subsequent educational attainment and in lower rates of social problems, such as teenage pregnancy and welfare dependency.”

Seeing those numbers, industry has taken up the issue. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce made improving early childhood education a policy priority in 2008, and two years earlier gave PNC its corporate stewardship award for promoting the issue. Locally, Virginia and D.C. enacted laws dramatically expanding pre-k programs this year.

Boeing, which has about 2,500 employees in Maryland and Virginia, is in need of workers who are able to work in teams, think critically and persevere emotionally, said Joyce Walters, global director of education and workforce initiatives. “The capacity to build those skills down the road really depends on a quality environment in the first five years of a child life,” she said. As a result, she said, 40 percent of the company’s 2008 charitable giving in the D.C. area is on early education this year, up from only 12 percent in 2006.

With many researchers, economists and financial companies already interested, getting government contracting and technology on board is a big next step, said Vera Steiner Blore, executive director of Fairfax Futures: “To see a company like Boeing say education really matters at a young age is a huge deal.”

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