

# Giving up on Beloit's kids is not an option

(First in a two-part series)

Stay with me, readers, and step back in time to the 1980s.

Beloit was deep into the de-industrialization that made a mockery of the old community saying, "What Beloit Makes, Makes Beloit." Factories were disappearing or downsizing. Jobs were being shed. The economic base was fracturing. People were suffering. Crime and drug abuse were rising.

Determined people realized no one was coming to save us. The result was Beloit 2000, which became a cooperative private and public initiative to improve the infrastructure and landscape of the community. The effort, which continues today, has resulted in hundreds of millions of dollars in investment, extraordinary building projects and a stronger job market and economic base.

So why isn't everyone singing the Hallelujah chorus?

Because despite the much-improved curb appeal, positive outcomes and better conditions for people — especially children — have sadly lagged behind. Demographic measurements continue to show that Beloit is slow to score human progress. Population remains stagnant at around 36,000. Per capita income is stuck around \$30,000, along with the median household income of about \$60,000. Both numbers are 20-30% below regional and state averages. Nearly one in five people live in poverty, more than 50% beyond regional and state comparables. The number of college graduates is about half the Wisconsin average. The number of foreign-born residents is double regional and state numbers suggesting the obvious — Beloit has plenty of non-English speaking residents, with all the accompanying challenges.

To be admittedly politically incorrect, remodeling the house won't necessarily solve all the problems of whoever resides there.

It is much easier to change appearances than it is to lift up human conditions. Fact is, Beloit 2000 knew that years ago but civic progress had to start somewhere and physical improvements were quicker and more achievable. No one doubted, though, that finding ways to raise prospects for future generations would be the heavier lift. Let's get into a little science. The human brain is the most important organ in the body. How well it functions will determine individual success. Research shows the period between the ages of 0-6 is crucial to healthy brain development, the kind that creates learning-ready kids.

Consider this statement from Harvard's Center on the Developing Child: "The need to address significant inequalities in opportunity, beginning in the earliest years of life, is both a fundamental moral responsibility and a critical investment in our nation's social and economic future."

Break that down and apply it to Beloit's demographics. If our community lags behind the norm it's almost certainly because children being raised with poverty, or limited family resources, by less educated parents and exposure to fewer books and words, and perhaps without ready ways to learn English or develop language skills, start well behind others and are at-risk for being caught in a cycle of reduced opportunity.

Social media warriors are eager to pounce and lay all the blame on the School District of Beloit and, without a doubt, there's lots of room for improvement there. Reading, math and science scores among our students compare poorly around Wisconsin. That's a fact.

But, adults, do the math. Until about age 4 and pre-school exposure, institutions of learning aren't involved with our kids. Science finds that, by then, the direction of a child's brain development is already well established. Even once a kid reaches kindergarten and through high school, schools control fewer than 1,000 hours annually — a fraction of all the hours in a day, month and year. Yet, somehow, teachers are supposed to make up for everything that happened — good or bad — in a kid's life.

For the smart mouths who get off on trashing educators and just about anybody else but themselves, negativity may feel good for a moment but does absolutely nothing to make Beloit a better place. Just the opposite.

Those who want a better community and higher achieving kids should tune out the keyboard complainers. They contribute nothing. They just want to point fingers while things burn.

Instead, focus on people and organizations that refuse to give up on our kids — all the kids — and what they represent, the hope of the future.

There are good people doing all they can to make a difference. One I have written about before is the Literacy for Life program initiated by the Stateline Community Foundation. It has been active in recent years working to improve opportunities for early childhood learning.

Today, however, is the first of a two-part series of columns on the Beloit Public Library's ambitious Discovery Playce project. The intention is to create a large space where infants through age 6 can learn through meaningful play in ways designed to stimulate brain development. The goal is to prepare little kids to become classroom-ready students, with a curiosity for learning, to help them

break away from poverty and low expectations. All while empowering parents to be stronger partners in guiding their kids to reach their full potential.

Come back next week to learn more, including how you can help.

**NEXT:** Discovery Playce poised to become a driver of change for Beloit families.

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