

Start young — really young — to support learning

(Second in a two-part series)

Some of you may remember a line from the 1971 commercial for the United Negro College Fund: “A mind is a terrible thing to waste.”

One could say the phrase captures what drives the Beloit Public Library’s Discovery PLAYce initiative, a \$4-plus million campaign to create space designed to help build school-ready brains among our youngest kids. Last week, this column looked at conditions prevalent in Beloit’s demographics that raise challenges for early childhood brain development. This week, the topic revolves around the idea that low expectations are not inevitable, and the community is not powerless to create positive change.

When completed, Discovery PLAYce will double the children’s section at the library and completely redesign the physical layout. That’s just the start. What comes next is a targeted program to animate the space with children ages 0-6, along with parents and caregivers, in a stimulating environment with the lofty goal of sparking the fires of learning.

There’s science behind the concept. Research shows by age 3 a child’s brain is 80% developed. That means two things: (1) For good or not so good, the brain’s becoming hard-wired by the advantages or disadvantages it experiences, and (2) waiting for schools to get involved at ages 4-5-6 can be too late.

Library Director Nick Dimassis and retired Beloit College professor Jeff Adams, president of the library foundation, invited me to join them for a tour of what is, and what will be. The first thing to understand is that Beloit has a great library. If you haven’t been there, you need to rectify that. The second thing is that the library is always getting better. No stuffy spaces with dusty book shelves and grumpy librarians scolding folks to be quiet. It’s a bright, active, inviting place filled with people and myriad ways to learn.

A clarification also is needed. There are two capital projects going on at the library — separate but related. Beloit Public Library competed for and captured a State of Wisconsin Flexible Facilities grant for \$3.89 million. Work is underway to make visionary improvements inside the library — including opening up the second floor for better community access — which is a necessary step to clear the way for doubling the children’s area and developing Discovery PLAYce. Local fundraising has started toward the \$4-plus million needed to create the children’s space.

Let's repeat: The \$3.89 million state grant is not for Discovery PLAYce. Funds for the children's area will be raised locally. Quietly, the campaign has been soliciting major giving, with considerable success. The Hendricks Family Foundation recently announced a \$1 million gift. The public drive will seek support from community residents and notably will include what's being called "100 Extraordinary Women" to promote the project, a vanguard of leaders giving \$1,000 each and challenging others to join them.

So: What is this plan? "The concept, design-wise, we start with a city landscape," Director Dimassis told me. "We create a mini-city in our space, the kids and the caregivers when they're here will see."

Think of it — in a small and somewhat abstract way — like Beloit itself. There will be representations of a lagoon, a pavilion stage, house, farm market, school bus, a restaurant — all acting as learning spaces for school readiness. The throughline is the idea of fun, without which it's impossible to engage kids. That's why the word "play" is central to Discovery PLAYce. Remember the target age: 0-6. If they're not enjoying themselves, they won't come back. But if accompanying parents and caregivers — who will be interacting with the kids, by design — find little ones happily occupied, return visits become an easier sell.

The space will be filled with research-based learning play stations, augmented by programming designed to stimulate continuing growth with the end goal of preparing Beloit's youngest to be classroom-ready when they reach school age. Along the way — by engaging parents and caregivers — the experience is also intended to help with at-home resources by providing a positive, collaborative environment for the adults.

This is an ambitious — even audacious — plan, tackling one of Beloit's most challenging situations, namely, how to improve chances for future generations to thrive.

Any plan is only as good as the results it generates. That requires measuring for success. Discovery PLAYce calls for an initial five-year approach, relentlessly evaluated. Belmark Associates has a five-year contract to provide feedback, which will be used to make effectiveness adjustments.

The plan also is only as good as participation among the targeted population. Outreach is underway and will be done on a continuing basis with church leaders, community organizations, school systems and more. The library is on the bus line, improving access. Once there, it's all free.

"Where else is a space like this anywhere?" Dimassis said. "I don't think there will be any problem getting the target population to come here at least once. Then it will be how to get them to return. That's the challenge."

Fun is the answer. Build it to be enjoyed, almost sneaking the learning into the process. Get kids through the door and let those little brains soak it up while they play.

I'm a believer in this and other community efforts that support early childhood learning. It's an all-hands challenge. I can't think of anything more important than giving our kids a better chance in life. Help them now or pay a big price later for inaction.

If you can give, contact folks at the library. Any amount is welcome. If you're a parent of a child in the targeted age group, plan to come when Discovery PLAYce opens next year. If you're a grandparent or caregiver, step up and step in. If you have ways to spread the word, do that.

Making a difference isn't just a feel-good thing; it's a forever thing.

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