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Investing in early childhood pays future dividends **(<http://www.sanmarcosrecord.com/local/x370466823/Investing-in-early-childhood-pays-future-dividends>)**

By Michelle Hamilton

Director of the Center for P-16 Initiatives (<http://www.sanmarcosrecord.com>)

— Achievement gaps start early. It is sometimes difficult to imagine, but national studies show that 40 percent of children entering kindergarten are already behind.

We often focus on low graduation rates, dropout rates and achievement gaps in later grades. But failure in kindergarten, really?

A recent study by the E3 Alliance shows that in Central Texas that rate is more likely to be 48 percent for those entering kindergarten without the prerequisite skills to be successful.

These skills include letter and number recognition, color recognition and basic vocabulary.

Unfortunately, many children do not catch up, instead they get further behind.

One of the demographic predictors of early failure is poverty. Children from lower income families are far more likely to enter kindergarten behind and lack early literacy skills that are essential to their success.

In fact, studies have recently shown that children from lower income families are likely to recognize as little as two letters of the alphabet when they enter school as compared to all 26 letters recognized by their middle income peers.

One contributing factor to early failure is the lack of a language-rich environment in homes of children from poverty.

Studies show that children from lower income families are much more likely to have fewer than two age-appropriate books in the home, whereas children from middle class families are likely to have 50 or more age-appropriate books in the home.

Parents, families and communities can play a large role in preparing young children to learn. For the past three years, SOAR (Seeking Opportunities, Achieving Results) has held a community book drive in San Marcos during the month of July.

The book drive is designed to distribute books into the homes of children who need them and are under the age of six.

The books have been distributed through partnering agencies such as Women Infants and Children

(WIC), Head Start and Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) –Homespun.

We can all play a role in helping erase the achievement gaps at an earlier age. As a community member you can donate books to the book drive in the month of July.

Book barrels will be placed around town in businesses and stores during the month of July. We are looking for books that are gently used that are appropriate for children under the age of six.

Books should have pictures and illustrations and vocabulary for children under the age of six.

Dr. Michelle Hamilton is the Director of the Center for P-16 Initiatives and an associate professor in the Department of Health and Human Performance at Texas State University. She is also a member of the Chamber of Commerce Education Committee and one of the founding members of SOAR.



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