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School districts seek state funding for prekindergarten

By Dawn Keller, dkeller@altoonamirror.com

Adrienne Ray stood in front of preschoolers at Tyrone Elementary School, pointing to each letter.  View "Shared Reading" in our local news section of MirrorTakes

The students were trying to find the letter "t." She asked if each letter was a "t." If it was, she had another question for them: "Uppercase or lowercase?"

Ray was involved in a lesson that's part of the Pre-K Counts program.

Gov. Ed Rendell wants to devote \$75 million to the program this year, allowing up to 11,000 children to enroll in a preschool program. Up until this point, most of the money has come from private sources: \$9,731,600 in private funding and \$2,150,000 from the state.

Tyrone has had the program for two years. The district moved fifth-graders to the middle school to make space.

The district, along with Intermediate Unit 8, Head Start and Hollidaysburg Area YMCA, have pre-kindergarten classes at the school. Most students are 3- and 4-year-olds, although some are 5.

"Our theory is that the kids are all going to be ours someday," Tyrone Assistant Superintendent Joann Lang said.

That's why it makes sense to pool resources and share training and techniques, she said.

State Rep. Mike Fleck, R-Huntingdon, toured the program last week, and state Sen. John H. Eichelberger Jr., R- Blair, is scheduled to tour the program Wednesday.

District officials want the lawmakers to see how the program works because they want state funding.

Tyrone has hired a program coordinator, literacy coach and parent coach. The new state money will allow more teachers to be hired, Lang said.

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There are two classes in each room every day. They last 3 1/2 hours.

In Head Start teacher Shana Smith's room, her students have centers: math and kid writing or poetry. They read aloud and have a snack, then it's time to go home. She has three staff members.

"It's very nice to have three staff members because you can break them up," she said.

Smith said Pre-K Counts has given her more training than she would have had otherwise, especially for kid writing, a program designed to have students draw a picture and then write a story about the picture before having an adult correct the writing.

"That's given me a lot of training to do more with these kiddos," Smith said.

Statistics show that the program works, said Mike Storm, state Department of Education spokesman.

As of June 31, 1,757 students were evaluated. Overall, in February 2006, children were assessed in the low average to average range. Within three months, Pre-K Counts children showed statistically significant development in spoken language, reading and daily living skills, he said.

Older Pre-K Counts children showed performance that met 80 percent of the state early learning standards at transition to kindergarten.

Lesa Lashinsky, Community Impact Coordinator-Early Childhood Initiatives with the United Way of Blair County, said research consistently shows that quality prekindergarten prepares children for school and life.

"Quality early learning today means a brighter future for our children and for all of us," she said.

Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak is not surprised by the results. Other studies have shown that the return for every \$1 invested in early childhood education is between \$6 and \$17, he said.

"No other economic development strategy shows this return," he said. "It's a smart use of commonwealth funds."

All eligible programs may apply for Pre-K Counts grants. However, programs in districts with 30 percent or more children participating in the free or reduced lunch program or individual programs focusing on at-risk children will receive priority.

In Blair County, 46.3 percent of children under age 5 are living in poverty, Lashinsky said.

"Our children could really benefit from Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts," she said.

Two area preschool programs say they will apply for Pre-K Counts grants if the Legislature approves the funding.

Jackie Clouser, president and chief executive officer of Lily Pond Child Development Centers Inc., said the grants will allow her organization to offer more comprehensive services, such as more talking to parents about whether they have a primary doctor, how they

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can get WIC and what resources about socialization are available for their children.

"I'm so proud of Pennsylvania and our governor for going in that direction," she said.

Jolie Cover, executive director of Begin With Us Child Care and Preschool Inc., said the grants will help the pre-school with salaries.

"We want to put someone with a degree in early childhood education in front of every group of children," she said, adding that state funding will be necessary to make that happen.

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