

It's never too soon to start learning

By: **JOAN HELLYER** (Mon, Apr/30/2007)

The Bristol Township School District is piloting a pre-kindergarten project this spring as a push heats up across the state to provide preschool kids with a jump on their education.

The preschool pilot project at Maple Shade Elementary School got under way last week. The two half-day classes are funded with federal grant money, said Michele Anderson, Bristol Township's state and federal programs coordinator.

Teacher Beth Bridges and teaching assistant Eileen Field engage the eight students in the two classes in various activities to get them used to learning and being comfortable with each other.

For instance, Bridges read "Matthew A.B.C." by Peter Catalanotto to the kids Thursday to help them learn the alphabet. The story focuses on Mrs. Tuttle's kindergarten class in which each of her 25 students is named Matthew. Mrs. Tuttle uses the first letter of the students' last names to identify their quirks and provide her with a way to tell them apart.

"Incognito," Bridges said as she talked to the students about "Matthew I" in the book. "That's an expensive word. We should put that on a dollar bill."

The district will expand the program to a full-year session in 2007-08, Anderson said. The half-day classes, to be funded with about \$150,000 from a federal Title I grant, will run from September to June, Anderson said. The district plans to enroll 18 students from the township in each session.

District officials also are hoping to line up funding from a proposed state early childhood education initiative to expand the preschool project to other Bristol Township schools, Anderson said.

Gov. Ed Rendell has proposed devoting \$75 million to provide 11,000 3- and 4-year-old kids across the state with a voluntary, high-quality pre-school education. The state Legislature is considering the proposal as it debates the state's proposed 2007-08 budget.

The preschool initiative makes sense, according to early childhood education advocates who visited with the Courier Times' editorial board Wednesday.

Children who receive a solid preschool education arrive for kindergarten "ready to learn and ready to succeed in life," said Sharon Easterling, the executive director of the Delaware Valley Association for the Education of Young Children.

The DVAEYC is part of a statewide coalition called Pre-K Counts that backs Rendell's initiative. The coalition is made up of educators, child advocates and law enforcement organizations like Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Pennsylvania.

Bruce Clash, the organization's state director, said a quality early education program is important.

"They will be twice as likely to do [well] in school and not end up in prison," Clash said.

Morrisville schools Superintendent Elizabeth Yonson is among the local educators working with Pre-K Counts to promote the early education initiative.

"Ninety percent of a child's brain is developed by 5 years of age. They are like little sponges. They just sop it up," Yonson said.

The investment in early education will pay off in the long run, the advocates said. They pointed to research that suggests for every \$1 invested in a high-quality preschool program, the public saves an estimated \$17 in remedial and special education, welfare, delinquency and crime control costs.

The kids in the Maple Shade program already are showing progress with their diligence in looking for letters and understanding processes, said Bridges.

"This will give them more confidence going into kindergarten," said Bridges, a former daycare operator.

The parents also like what they see in the early stages of the pilot project.

"My daughter has changed completely. She used to be shy, but now she's not. It's awesome," said Sonya Umanzor, mother of Mikayla.

Mikayla's friend, Amy Ambrose, said they do a lot of reading with their teacher during class.

"You learn how to read. That's why we like coming here: to read," Amy, 5, said.

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