

Early bird education gets a boost statewide

Pennsylvania pours \$75M into pre-kindergarten

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Last week, a pre-school age boy settled down at a table in a local child-care center and started wrestling with a wooden puzzle shaped like a tiger.

An aide stood next to him while his classmates nearby played with dolls, acted out stories and created collages — the kinds of activities that experts say stimulate everything from social and relationship skills to math and language abilities later in life.

But the young boy's goal was modest in comparison. He had tried many times before to put together the puzzle, which was comprised of about 20 pieces, but had never finished it, his aide explained.

This was for a reason, and the center's staff was working with the boy's family to find it. He was likely either autistic or had Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Or a combination.

A few minutes passed, then something unprecedented happened: The boy finished the puzzle. Every piece was put perfectly in place.

It was a small victory, to be sure, but it is also the kind of thing that educators and policy-makers hope has larger ripple effects later in life.

A thickening pile of research shows that children who are at risk of falling behind in school before they even enter can benefit from focused, early attention. Otherwise, gaps in learning that develop early on tend to persist and even widen.

And that research is one big reason that states are increasingly making large-scale investments in early childhood education. Sometimes it means making money available for full-day kindergarten; in other cases, it calls for starting rigorous, high-quality pre-kindergarten, or pre-k.

For policy-makers and educators, the idea of pre-k seems laudable enough, even if the details can pose some tricky questions.

Which children should get access to it? How do you attract qualified staff members to a field that notoriously underpays? Should children be pushed academically, reflecting recent brain research showing how nimble their minds are, or will this hasten a move to testing pre-schoolers?

These and other questions may account for why the total number of children in pre-k is still fairly small, according to Pre-K Now, an advocate for high-quality, voluntary pre-kindergarten for all 3- and 4-year-olds. State-funded pre-k programs account for less than 15 percent of the nation's 3- and 4-year-olds.

But momentum is clearly moving in favor of these programs.

Forty of the 50 states currently have some form of legislative, gubernatorial or policy-maker support, Pre-K Now reports.

This year, it made inroads in Pennsylvania when Gov. Ed Rendell and the General Assembly poured \$75 million from this year's budget into a program called Pre-K Counts.

The money will be better spent there than on big-ticket budget items such as prisons and welfare, said Rep. Mike Carroll, D-118. "It's a great use of tax dollars," Carroll said of pre-k. "For these kids, it's the best investment we can make in their future."

Earlier this month, the state selected 150 providers — mostly Head Start, child-care centers, school districts and nursery schools — to create free slots in existing high-quality centers for pre-school age children who are at risk of academic failure.

The program is expected to make 11,000 of those spots available. In Monroe County, four providers have been chosen: The Growing Place Child Care Centers, Pocono Services for Families and Children, which also houses Head Start, and Tobyhanna Kids Day Care Center and Wee Wons.

Together, they will receive more than \$850,000 to provide free care to 143 children.

"I didn't really believe that in my lifetime, or in the lifetime of my career, I'd really see this," said Lisa Eick, executive director of The Growing Place, which operates six sites in the West End.

"Pre-k was seen as a luxury and not as a necessity," Eick said. "This turnaround of investing in early childhood is amazing."

The state has said its goal is to provide slots at centers that it deems to be high-quality. Grantees will be required to hire teachers who already have, or are in the process of receiving, their bachelor's degree and certification in early childhood education. Class sizes will be kept small, and the curriculum matched with Pennsylvania Early Learning standards.

The state's criteria for admitting children are fairly broad. According to the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Pre-K Counts is meant for children whose "economic, language, cultural or other disadvantages" place them at a higher risk of failure.

If a child's family earns less than 300 percent of the federal poverty level (for a family of four, it would mean \$61,950 a year), he or she would also be considered eligible for Pre-K Counts.

Pennsylvania has sought to avoid the pitfalls of other states, where efforts to provide pre-k universally have occasionally stumbled. Florida voters approved a statewide mandate for pre-k for all children, but it has been faulted for being under-funded.

In California, voters rejected a ballot measure pitched by the actor, director and advocate Rob Reiner to provide universal pre-school. It was opposed by wealthy voters, who would have been taxed to pay for it, and by child-care providers, who would have seen their business siphoned off by state-operated centers.

In Pennsylvania, Pre-K Counts has been lauded in some circles for building more sensibly on the experience of experts.

"That they're using the expertise of the people in the field is also really important," said Eick, who has more than 20 years of experience in child care. "They're partnering with those who are already doing it."

Many of those in the field also favor going easy on academic basics like reading and writing at this age. Instead, what early childhood educators want to see is students put in the proper mind-set to enter school. Many refer to it as being "ready to learn."

"The brain research does validate the fact that young children are capable of absorbing a great deal," said Susan Harlan, professor of early childhood and elementary education at East Stroudsburg University. "But that does not mean that we can — or should — teach every 4-year-old to read."

Instead, sensory and self-directed learning is more important at this age. So is being socialized.

"Being able to walk in and know not to throw your book bag down and kick the blocks over is much more important than knowing how to read," said Cathy Guldish, owner of Wee Wons. "If a child isn't ready to learn, no learning can happen."

Guldish also teaches remedial reading at Pocono Mountain, so she said she is familiar with the costs of not intervening early.

"I feel it would save the school districts a lot of money for remediation," she said, referring to the early intervention. "If we get them to school earlier, they wind up being ready to learn. Now when a teacher speaks, they think maybe I'll learn something. They come to school knowing their name. They'll come to school on an even playing field."

PRE-K COUNTS GRANTS

The state has invested \$75 million in pre-k programs this year. Locally, four organizations are receiving a total of more than \$850,000.

Provider: The Growing Place Child Care Centers

Location: Brodheadsville

Number of slots: 68 spots in half-day classes for 4-year-olds. Classes start in October.

State support: \$265,200

How to apply: Call (610) 681-5486. Applications available in September.

Provider: Pocono Services for Families and Children

Location: East Stroudsburg

Number of slots: 15 for 3- and 4-year-olds in the East Stroudsburg school district. Classes will run 9-2:30 p.m. and start in November.

State support: \$118,500

How to apply: Call (570) 421-2711 and ask for Mary Kay Posselli.

Provider: Tobyhanna Kids Day Care Center

Location: Tobyhanna

Number of slots: 40 for ages 3-5. Classes to start in October.

State support: \$314,000

How to apply: Call (570) 894-8896

Provider: Wee Wons, Inc.

Location: Pocono Pines

Number of slots: 20 for 3-5-year-olds. Classes will run from 9-3.

State support: \$157,000

How to apply: Call (570) 646-6500