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## Camps introduce children to school

By Susan Snyder  
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In September, Michael Jarosz Jr. will begin kindergarten.

And so, he's going to camp to get ready.

Forty years ago, kindergarten used to be the beginning of formal education.

That is no longer true.

With more and more children already exposed to classroomlike settings through preschool and day care, the Philadelphia School District has decided that there is a need to acclimate those entering kindergarten without such experience.

The district has started a six-week program this summer, called Pre-Kindercamp, for children who have had little or no preschool experience.

Pre-Kindercamp offers small classes with 10 children and one teacher, a curriculum rich in literacy, and instruction in basic social skills, such as how to sit at a desk, listen, and follow directions.

The program is part of a larger effort by the district to get as many students into preschool as possible and improve the quality of reading and math instruction in those programs. Officials estimate that 4,000 students - about 30 percent of its 13,000 kindergartners - enter with no previous formal education.

The camp, which runs from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. four days a week through Thursday, will reach only a quarter of those students, but district officials say it's a start.

In the fall, the district plans to create and expand other preschool programs to increase the overall number of children served from 7,000 to about 7,800, officials said.

Other districts, such as William Penn and Upper Darby in Delaware County and Hatboro-Horsham in Montgomery County, also have taken steps to improve early-childhood education in the last few years.

Most studies have shown that children with preschool experience go on to have a better academic experience. It's especially helpful for children from difficult family backgrounds.

"Preschool helps get them up to the starting line," said Steve Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research.

Rita Wetton, Michael's grandmother, said she got custody of Michael from his mother in February. The boy's father - Wetton's son - is in prison.

Michael, who will turn 5 next month, attends camp at Spruance School in Northeast Philadelphia - one of 41 city camp sites.

"He's more behaved now. He wants to write more... . He sings songs that they do in school. He feels like he's grown up," said Wetton, 52.

Michael's teacher, Linda Jennings, agreed.

"Michael has come so far. Before, he cried every day. I just let him stand at the window and watch his grandmother go," she said. "It's so much easier to deal with that when I have eight or 10 kids and not 30."

Erlene Bass Nelson, a kindergarten teacher in Philadelphia for 45 years, said children with preschool experience have learned to like school, and their parents have learned to volunteer in school and work in partnership with teachers.

"That's a big plus," said Nelson, who teaches in the prekindergarten camp at Locke School in West Philadelphia.

Before the creation of Head Start for impoverished children in the early 1960s, few children attended preschool. By 1999, 58 percent of 3- and 4-year-olds were enrolled, according to Barnett's institute.

The reasons vary, experts say. Today, seven out of 10 mothers are working outside the home. Brain research has shown that younger children can absorb even more than originally thought. And the increasing focus on educational standards has made the early grades, including kindergarten, more academically rigorous.

"We've ratcheted up what we expect from kids in the early grades," Barnett said. "It's been a total revolution in the education of young children."

But some children aren't getting the help. Parents with higher incomes pay for preschool, while Head Start covers programs for the poorest children. There's only funding to pay for 60 percent of the children who qualify for Head Start.

Forty-one states, including New Jersey, provide some preschool funding, but Pennsylvania does not. School districts such as Philadelphia are finding ways to bridge the gap.

"They should be commended for it because this is the best they can do under a bad set of circumstances," said Joan Benso, president of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, which has been lobbying for state funding for preschool.

William Penn School District hosted two programs this year, serving 100 to 125 children. "We believe it's important to educate these kids as early as possible," said Superintendent James O'Toole.

Hatboro-Horsham School District will run a program later this summer. In a different approach, Upper Darby School District has offered a three-evening training for first-time parents of children about to enter kindergarten for the last four years.

In Philadelphia, the district is using \$1.2 million - mostly federal funds - to pay for both the prekindergarten camp and a camp for 1,500 children who have completed kindergarten but need extra help before first grade.

Officials hope to expand the program next year. Transportation is not included, which was a barrier for some parents.

"That's probably something we'll look at next year," said Donna Piekarski, program administrator.

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One morning last week, Michael and four classmates sat on floor mats as Jennings used the end of a wooden spoon to point and read words from a large book positioned on an easel: "All the baby bubbles in my bath, bounce along and bump me, and make me laugh."

"What rhymes with slop, plopp, flopp and bubbles do it?" Jennings asked.

Tiara Sawyer, 5, called out: "Bubbles pop."

"That's right," Jennings said.

"Are we done?" the girl asked. "I didn't eat breakfast."

"You think you can last?" Jennings asked. Tiara shook her head, but she did last - an early lesson in self-control.

Tiara said she was scared on the first day, but not anymore.

"I like to play, and I like to learn," she said, as she made cakes with green clay.

Piekarski said the district is pre-testing and post-testing students and will follow their progress through kindergarten. They also will be offered slots in Kindercamp next summer. "We want to follow these kids through to see what happens," she said.

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