

Preschool needs catching Pa.'s eye

By: **JO CIAVAGLIA AND NAOMI JENKINS** (Fri, Feb/20/2004)

Pennsylvania ranks near the bottom of the nation in providing quality preschool programs, according to a national report released yesterday.

That finding seems to surprise no one involved in early childhood education in Bucks County.

"We have known for years that Pennsylvania is one of only nine states that doesn't fund preschool, so that isn't a surprise at all," said Sue Lundy, associate director of the Delaware Valley Child Care Council. "The majority of childcare programs are mediocre to poor."

However, the only public school district in Lower Bucks with a pre-kindergarten program for 4-year-olds appears to be succeeding.

Tom Shaffer, director of elementary education in the Bristol Borough School District, says he has data showing children who've gone through its program are performing better in school.

"Pennsylvania does need to put more money toward early childhood," Shaffer said. "Absolutely."

Even the state Department of Education can't argue with the findings in "The 2003 State of Preschool" report released by the National Institute for Early Education Research, which examined state funding for educating 3- and 4-year-olds. The report is the first in an annual series reporting on programs funded by state governments to educate preschoolers.

"Obviously, there is always room for improvement," said Bethany Yenner, a department spokeswoman. "With the governor's proposed budget, there are a lot of things for preschool. We recognize the need to add things in that program."

But Yenner added that steps have been made to improve preschool programs since the 2001-02 school year from which data for the report was culled.

Educators and studies agree that early childhood is a critical time for acquisition of cognitive, social and emotional skills needed for later academic success.

But according to the new report on state-funded pre-kindergarten programs, Pennsylvania ranks 33rd in the United States in access for 4-year-olds and 50th in access for 3-year-olds.

The report gives Pennsylvania a score of three out of 10 quality standards for programs with positive marks for requiring a bachelor's degree for preschool teachers, for providing them with ongoing education and for giving preschool students health screenings.

Pennsylvania doesn't fund pre-kindergarten programs, though, as of last school year, 33 school districts voluntarily provided school-based educational services to 4-year-olds, three more than in 2001-02, which the report cites, Yenner said.

For the first time, Gov. Rendell is proposing to spend \$15 million to supplement federal Head Start preschool program funding and enroll more children. Pennsylvania is one of nine states that doesn't provide the federal program for low-income children with extra funding.

That \$15 million was set aside for next school year as part of the final 2003-04 state budget approved in December, Yenner said. The governor also wants a \$5 million education tax credit for the expansion of private preschool programs, which would allow businesses to get a tax break if they donate a scholarship to a preschool to make tuition grants available, Yenner said.

Meanwhile, also in December, the state Legislature agreed to \$175 million in accountability block grants to school districts, which can use the money to create a variety of early childhood education initiatives, including preschool and full-day kindergarten programs.

Those are steps in the right direction, some local early childhood education advocates said yesterday.

Lundy is encouraged that Rendell appears committed to early childhood education and the Republican-controlled Legislature also appears to support pre-kindergarten programs.

"It's just if they can work things out," she added. "It has to be a funded mandate."

Bristol Borough uses federal Title 1 reading funds to pay for its 7-year-old, pre-kindergarten program for students identified as needing extra support in fine and gross motor and social skills.

The half-day program cost a little more than \$100,000 this year, including \$30,000 in state money the district received for improving school attendance, Shaffer said. The money was used to create a model classroom for the Children's Literacy Initiative, a nonprofit organization that has a specific program for promoting literature in the classroom.

There are 38 students enrolled in the morning or afternoon session - and there is a waiting list. The district also is the only one in Bucks with a regular full-day kindergarten program.

The district decided to invest resources into early childhood education citing growing research that says it is critical, Shaffer said. Also, district officials were seeing a lot of kids lacking many basic skills, he added. "Studies were showing that if you address their needs at the primary level, they'll be more successful in school," Shaffer said.

Pam Pharr, co-owner of Pam and Pam's Latchkey Kids, a private Bensalem preschool, also was not surprised by the report's findings. She believes more daycare centers could benefit by applying for state and federal grants.

"We have received several grants from the state," said Pharr, who co-owns the business with Pam King. The private preschool is partnered with a local Head Start, so it also gets funding for its children who are referred from Head Start schools.

"We're doing pretty good, but we could certainly use more," Pharr said. "We're not rolling in money."

Currently, the Bensalem preschool serves 63 children and has 16 staff members, she said.

"With more money, we could hire more people. It would be nice to get new playground equipment," Pharr said.

Pam and Pam's preschool program teaches 3- and 4-year-olds the basics for kindergarten.

"They learn letter recognition, order placement. We have a curriculum that prepares them in five different facets - social, emotional, math, science - but it's brought down to a level that's age appropriate," Pharr said. "Jello makes a great science project."

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