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***Making the Most of Young Minds: Advocates Tout Benefits of Pre-K Programs***

*By Christine Metz*



Photo by [Richard Gwin](#).

Angelique EagleWoman plays with her son, Maverick Eagle, 4, at their home in Lawrence. Maverick is a student in the pre-kindergarten program at the Children's Learning Center. Almost 100 children in Douglas County take part in the state's \$5 million pre-K program.

The other day Sonya Lancaster and her 4-year-old son, Sam Sharp, had a discussion about enamel.

Except, Sam didn't use the actual word. He referred to it as something like "there is just one thing that doesn't come off your teeth. It is the white part."

"Yes," Lancaster said. "That's enamel."

The conversation was brought to them courtesy of the letter D, which prompted a unit on dentists in Sam's pre-kindergarten classroom at the Children's Learning Center.

That unit inspired mouths made of paper plates and marshmallows, giant yellow teeth painted with toothbrushes, and much singing and reading about that dreaded visit to the dentist's office.

Sam's learning was made possible through a state-funded trial pre-kindergarten project. Early childhood education advocates hope that someday classes like the one Sam is in will be available to every 4-year-old

in Kansas.

Started in 2006, the pre-kindergarten program is in a mix of public schools, nonprofit organizations and community-funded centers. About half of the students are low-income, at-risk children, but many are not.

Sam is one of almost 100 children in Douglas County taking part in the state's \$5 million program. And Douglas County is one of 15 counties that have the classrooms.

### **State recognition**

The program is one more sign of the momentum that early childhood education is gaining in Kansas.

In her State of the State address, Gov. Kathleen Sebelius highlighted the importance of quality education for children ages 5 and younger.

"We can't afford for any of our young Kansans to be so far behind that they never catch up by the time they enter kindergarten," Sebelius said.

A week later, the governor released her 2009 budget. In it was an additional \$30 million for funding early childhood education. The largest chunk would make \$23 million available in block grants that focus on at-risk children and underserved areas. An additional \$1.2 million is proposed for the pre-kindergarten program.

Advocates for early childhood education have traditionally pointed to Kansas as being among the worst states in the country for pre-elementary school funding. But in the past few years, they have seen progress.

"The governor has been really supportive, and we are really excited about the possibilities that could come out of this legislative session," said Anna Jenny, executive director of the Douglas County Child Development Association.

### **Playing with intent**

At the Children's Learning Center, the 4-year-olds in the pre-kindergarten program clanged two red sticks together screaming in pretended fright as they sang about going on a bear hunt. They laughed at the thought of a bear combing his hair or a whale with a polka-dot tail.

Outside they ran in circles, chased after one another and peddled furiously on tricycles. During group time, they practiced writing the letter D, took great care gluing marshmallows to paper plates, pieced together puzzles and made believe that they were at the dentist. Then it was time for stories. All of this happened before noon.

The day isn't as carefree as it might seem. The teachers — Eric Lowe and Nicole Shockley — had laid out detailed lesson plans, which were posted near the door.

The room — covered in brightly colored letters, numbers and shapes — was decorated with learning in mind. The alphabet is placed at the eye-level of a 4-year-old, pictures go with words and the student's names and portrait hang in their lockers. The idea is to create a "literature-rich" environment.

Small tasks — from zipping up coats to playing with blocks — are designed to encourage independence.

Holly Turner, executive director of the Children's Learning Center, said that while some of the techniques have been around since she started teaching in 1979, early childhood education has become more

purposeful.

Yet, play is still key.

“We never want to take play out of our vocabulary, because that is where we cross the line,” Turner said.

Jenny, who wrote the grant for Douglas County’s pre-kindergarten program, calls it “playing with intent.”

As part of the program, “research-based curriculum” must be used, meaning that the teaching methods are backed up by scientific studies that they work.

It’s not the lesson plans, however, that set the pre-kindergarten program apart. The classrooms have a lower teacher-to-student ratio (1-to-8) than state licensing requirements. The lead teachers must have four-year college degrees. The classrooms must score four stars out of five on the state’s quality ratings system. And, there is a family service advocate to work with parents.

This school year, Douglas County received \$390,000 for six classrooms in Lawrence and Baldwin City. The program has been in place since July.

Most of the money goes toward paying for the teacher’s salaries, which have been boosted to be on scale with what teachers in the Lawrence school district are paid.

Part of the grant also brings in programming from the Lawrence Art Center.

### **Making an investment**

In 1856, the first kindergarten in the United States opened in Watertown, Wis. At that time, kindergarten had been a tough sell, said John Rury, a Kansas University education professor.

By the 1960s, the federally funded Head Start program was set up to educate low-income and at-risk preschoolers before they got to kindergarten.

As more middle-class mothers entered the workforce, a higher priority was given to child care. Another boost came in the past two decades with the advent of brain development research. While the research has yet to make any “big revelations,” Rury said it did spur parents into making sure their children were in quality learning environments at an early age.

### **The critic**

John LaPlante acknowledges that criticizing early childhood education is like speaking out against ice cream. As an education policy fellow for the small-government minded Flint Hills Center for Public Policy, LaPlante has concerns.

“I would say the desire for this is understandable. Obviously it’s come back to ‘Well, we’ve tried different reforms in the K through 12 system and they are not giving us the results we would like. Let’s try something else,’ ” he said.

LaPlante points to a study that showed the benefits of early childhood education tended to fade out within a year or two.

The reforms and money would be better spent later in students’ school careers where the achievement gap is wider, he said. He also worries the push for pre-kindergarten programs will extend from beyond the at-risk

group to the whole population.

“There are other things we can do besides bringing more students into the public realm when we are not really doing the job we would like to with the ones we have,” he said.

#### **Other benefits**

Rich Minder, a Lawrence school board member and a collaborative projects coordinator for Success by Six, said several studies point toward the long-term benefits of early childhood education. Fewer students drop out of school and have remediation needs. Investments in early childhood education leads to a healthier workforce, more productivity, less crime and higher academic achievement.

“Pre-K is really about economic development and our community’s economic vitality in the long run,” Minder said.

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