

Kentucky School Advocate

Preschool education in Kentucky: momentum without money

By Madelynn Coldiron
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When it comes to expanding Kentucky's preschool program, the spirit appears to be willing but the coffers aren't able.

Pre-K and early childhood care in Kentucky have garnered a higher profile on several fronts. Consider that within the past year or so:

- KSBA has received funding through Pew Charitable Trusts to promote the importance of preschool among the state's school board members.
- The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence has launched a movement to invest more in quality early care and education.
- Gov. Steve Beshear is expected to announce a statewide task force with the intent of better connecting all early childhood education efforts, including preschool.
- An older-adults group, Generations United, is pushing for preschool expansion in Kentucky.
- Kentucky's Early Childhood Development Authority is launching two school district pilot projects to demonstrate collaborative early education models.

It sounds as if the state is moving in the right direction, but as a report from the national group Pre-K Now pointed out in the fall, the money has not followed the momentum. Its state-by-state analysis identified Kentucky as one of a minority of states that did not increase pre-K funding this fiscal year. The flat funding of preschool programs "will force programs to either reduce access or cut corners on quality," the group said.

"We did sort of have a cut because we served more children," pointed out Annette Bridges, director early childhood development in the state education department.

Kentucky had been ahead of other states in preschool after KERA was enacted nearly 20 years ago. In its analysis, Pre-K Now noted that the state at one point was close to becoming a national leader.

"We're now starting to get behind," said Cindy Heine, associate executive director of the Prichard Committee, which founded the Strong Start Kentucky initiative. "We have been working to try to garner support for expanding pre-K. The challenge, of course – and we think we have good support for it and we know we have the governor's support – is there is no money."

Preschool expansion to encompass children in families within 200 percent of the federal poverty level is a legislative priority of KSBA, the Prichard group and the Kentucky Board of Education. The state board put a \$13.5 million price tag on the expansion for 4-year olds, while a 2007 Prichard preschool report pegged the cost of covering both age groups at \$72 million. Currently, Kentucky preschool programs serve 4-year-olds living at 150 percent of the poverty level and all 3- and 4-year-olds with disabilities. Only about five school districts go beyond that to offer preschool for all 4-year-olds, some charging tuition, Bridges said.

Combined with federally funded Head Start, about 37 percent of the state's 3- and 4-year-olds benefit from preschool, according to the Prichard report.

But with the state facing grim fiscal times, "The challenge is working to be sure that when there are any dollars available that we are ready for expanding quality programs," Heine said.

OTHER CHALLENGES

Aside from funding, Kentucky faces other barriers in early childhood education. Collaboration among child care providers, federal Head Start and school district preschools is a big issue, something the Strong Start initiative and the governor's task force want to address. "For years we've operated in silos," Bridges said.

She said high-quality programming for child care centers is a weak link in the early childhood chain. The National Association of Child Care Resources & Referral Agencies ranked Kentucky's standards for child care providers dead last among the states, with a 22nd-place ranking for oversight. The state's voluntary child care rating system has helped, Bridges said, "but we keep seeing the same results: that poor children, children on subsidies, are in lower-quality child care programs."

Private child care providers also fear competition if school district preschools are expanded, she added.

The state's Early Childhood Development Authority is about to see what a seamless early childhood system might look like when it bestows \$100,000 two-year grants to two school districts that will pilot a collaborative early childhood care and education model. The idea is to ensure that children get what they need at each stage to be fully prepared for kindergarten and beyond.

In addition to cementing a seamless relationship among early childhood care and education providers, the infrastructure necessary to support that collaboration still has to follow.

That's one reason advocates for voluntary universal preschool are dropping back to an incremental approach – namely the serving of children within 200 percent of poverty level.

“We do have good programs at the universities that are preparing bachelor’s level early childhood-certified teachers but we don’t have enough of those teachers today to serve all the children in Kentucky,” Heine said, adding that once the infrastructure is there, “we can begin to provide more and more slots for children.”

Whatever the obstacles, an understanding of the potential of expanded preschool does not seem to be one of them.

“We think that the public and most policy makers see the value of quality preschool for our children and are supportive,” Heine said.

Bridges notes, “We believe that preschool is a dropout prevention program. We think it’s an economic investment.”

She thinks school board members are aware of the value of preschool education because last year boards earmarked a total of nearly \$5 million in flexible focus funds for preschool. “The other good sign is the transportation piece – they don’t have to provide transportation for preschool children, but 99 percent of them do,” she said.