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The ABCs of Pre-K

Early childhood education push on Kentucky's agenda

By Tom O'Neill
Post staff reporter

Only three states - Georgia, Florida and Oklahoma - offer all-day, pre-kindergarten programs for 4-year-olds.

Will Ohio's neighbor to the south be the fourth?

That's the long-term goal of a coalition of Kentucky education and social service groups, who will attempt to advance their cause in the coming months.

The groups don't expect to win full funding all at once. Instead, they'll work to expand state support for more families, and build toward the longer-term goal of voluntary pre-kindergarten for all 3- and 4-year-olds in Kentucky, with parents paying a portion of the cost.

Right now, the proposal is being shaped for presentation to the state lawmakers, who next meet in January. A proposal could be ready by late October.

"It's partly a funding question," said Bob Sexton, executive director of the Lexington-based Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, one of Kentucky's foremost education advocacy groups.

The short-term goal is to get more low-income kids into publicly funded programs by raising the income limit for pre-K eligibility to 200 percent of the poverty level. It's currently 150 percent. That would increase the rolls by about 10,000 kids, making about half the 4-year-olds in Kentucky eligible.

It would be the second increase in three years in a program that began in 1990 with the nationally recognized Kentucky Education Reform Act, or KERA, which restructured the public school system and pumped more money into it.

Under existing law, Kentucky public school districts are required to provide pre-K services for every 4-year-old in a family with an income 150 percent of the poverty level, which in Kentucky is \$20,650 for a family of four, and 4-year-olds with disabilities. In 2006, the income eligibility level was raised from 130 percent, which meant the state's funding rose from about \$50 million to its current \$75.1 million.

The Prichard Committee - one of the groups that pushed for KERA - is taking the lead in pushing for expanded preschool. In March, the group launched an initiative called "Strong Start



ZOOM TERRY DUENNES/The Post

Karra Hendrickson, 4, raises her hand to answer a question in a pre-kindergarten class at John G. Carlisle School in Covington.

CLOSER LOOK

Pre-kindergarten facts in Kentucky

Of the 273,000 Kentuckians ages birth to 5 (in 2005): 21 percent live below the poverty level; and 46 percent live at twice the poverty level, which would be \$41,300 for a family of four.

63 percent of mothers with children under age 6 are in the workforce.

The state funded preschool in 2005-2006 for 24,587 3- and 4-year-olds, and 13,340 children with disabilities.

Federally funded Head Start, a blend of preschool and childcare services, provides annually for nearly 16,500 children in 33 programs in all 120 counties.

Source: Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence

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Kentucky: Quality Pre-K for Every Child." The Prichard Committee has been soliciting support from groups that provide pre-K services, such as the United Way of Greater Cincinnati.

In Northern Kentucky, the United Way has a big hand in funding programs, some at schools but primarily through local child-care providers. (Pre-kindergarten differs from childcare in that teachers have additional training and responsibilities.)

The Prichard Committee hopes to soon have a "statement of agreement" that eases lawmakers' concerns that expanding the state's role in pre-K education won't run counter to what local agencies are already doing. That's why the Prichard Committee needs the United Way's support.

"The objection of the state moving to do this is it competes with local agencies," Sexton said.

Sexton believes the key will be presenting a united front when the General Assembly returns.

Leshia Lyman, director for the United Way office in Northern Kentucky, said the state-local conflict can be overcome. The United Way has been pushing agencies to target early-childhood services under the notion that help early in life translates into less demand for services later in life.

"Certainly, we're at the table because this lines up with what we do," Lyman said.

"We're talking birth to five, which is why we're very interested. Locally, we invest a lot of money in early-childhood strategies, especially child-care centers; that's the majority of access to quality services."

The theory is that getting 3- and 4-year-olds prepared to succeed in elementary school, and comfortable in the school setting, is crucial to their longer-term success.

And the most important subject at that age is reading, the window to all other learning. That's what Covington Independent Schools have found through participation in United Way's Success by 6 program.

Success by 6, in its 16th year, is the nation's largest network of early childhood coalitions with more than 350 locations, according to the United Way Web site.

In Northern Kentucky, two private agencies -- Covington-based Children Inc. and Newport-based Brighton Center -- provide a bulk of the Success by 6 services among nonprofits.

Among public school programs, Covington School Superintendent Jack Moreland said the success of his district's five-year-old program for all-day kindergarten showed that more pre-K programs could work, too. In January 2006, the district moved to all-day pre-K. At the end of their kindergarten year, the 132 students who had attended at least four months of all-day pre-K were tested for first-grade reading readiness.

The standard test is called Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills. In one subtest, 89 percent of the students scored at grade level. In a second subtest, 90 percent were at grade level.

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ZOOM TERRY DUENNES/The Post

Breanna Engel teaches a pre-kindergarten class at John G. Carlisle School in Covington. Kentucky may expand its pre-kindergarten program to include more students.



ZOOM TERRY DUENNES/The Post

Breanna Engel reads to her pre-kindergarten students at John G. Carlisle School.

"The data shows youngsters coming out of those two programs are at or above reading levels, and that was our goal," Moreland said.

"Get them at grade level, you can keep them at grade level."

One of the obstacles to the Prichard Committee's initiative is that not all schools have the facilities to accommodate pre-K programs. Boone County, for example, the fastest-growing district in the state with nearly 18,000 students, is struggling to house students in kindergarten through high school.

"We'd love to do a lot of those things," Superintendent Bryan Blavatt said.

"When the state talks about it, we're all for it but it won't happen in Boone. We don't have the space."

In a separate effort, two organizations called Military Child Education Coalition and Pre-K Now recently issued a report calling for publicly funded pre-K education for all kids with parents in the military.

The report was unveiled at the annual conference of Pre-K Now, a public education and advocacy group in Washington, D.C.

Pre-K Now evaluates states' status in offering preschool. Kentucky, for example, has pre-K services for 29 percent of its 4-year-olds, while Ohio has services for only 4 percent. However, in rating the political climate for advancing the pre-K cause, Ohio outscores Kentucky with six of ten criteria met versus four of 10.

The group says of Kentucky's pre-K program efforts: "Tight fiscal circumstances prevented an expansion of the program for over a decade, but recent gubernatorial and legislative leadership have provided an impetus for growth; the past two legislative sessions have seen a combined funding increase of more than \$30 million dollars. The program is currently offered in every school district in the state and serves 84 percent of eligible children."

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