

Pottstown bucking national trend of slowing early education efforts

- The Mercury
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- Posted: 01/18/12 12:01 am



Christine Dise tells an animated story to her Pre-K class at the Pottstown Family YMCA. (Photo by Kevin Hoffman/The Mercury)

POTTSTOWN — While expansion of early education programs nationwide may be slowing in the ongoing recession, pre-kindergarten efforts in Pottstown continue to enjoy the support of parents and educators alike, even in the uncertain funding environment.

An examination of early education programs by the Associated Press found that many states are cutting or level-funding programs that support local pre-K programs, leaving school districts with the difficult choice of picking up the difference from local taxes or cutting programs considered to be among the most beneficial to future student success.

Although 40 states currently fund pre-K programs, Pennsylvania included, funding cuts began slowing in the 2009-10 school year, according to Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University.

Federal stimulus funding plugged the hole in Pennsylvania's education budget for a year, but last year, funding for the Pre-K Counts program was "level-funded" and money was cut from the Accountability Block Grant program.

Although that funding can be used for a variety of educational needs, about 70 percent of Pennsylvania school districts use it to fund full-day kindergarten or pre-kindergarten programs, said Jeff Sparagana, assistant superintendent for Pottstown Schools, and a member of the Governor's Task Force on Early Education.

In fact, Accountability Block Grants are what neighboring Pottsgrove School District has used to fund its full-day kindergarten. Anticipated cuts in that funding are among the reasons the administration there has cited for wanting to create "grade centers" at its schools and make the most of what money does come.

Sparagana said he is not aware of any Pennsylvania districts which have cut early education — yet, although he said it was discussed in Pittsburgh and other western districts in the last budget cycle. Kindergarten was even on the list of mandated programs that could conceivably be cut during Pottstown's budget deliberations last year, although no one seriously pursued it.

Although it's still too early to say, as Gov. Tom Corbett will not release his budget proposals until February, Sparagana said "the forecast is pretty bleak in terms of state budget money."

A loss of funding could have serious short- and long-term consequences, warned Mary Rieck.

Rieck is the coordinator of Pottstown's PEAK program. PEAK stands for Pottstown Early Action for Kindergarten readiness.

In the short term, loss of funding from any of the assorted sources that are combined to run early education programs will mean some children, mostly lower-income children, will arrive in kindergarten less prepared than their peers from wealthier families.

Some studies indicate those without access to pre-kindergarten arrive 18 months behind students who have had the benefit of such a program, a gap that remains and makes them more likely to fail in school or drop out.

"Everybody doesn't get that quality experience in the beginning of their life," said Jackie Wilder, director of the child care program at the Freedom Valley YMCA in Pottstown, which is a PEAK partner.

"It's important that everyone get a quality start, and every child doesn't have access to that," Wilder said. "Many families don't have the funds to enroll their children in private pre-schools," said Rieck.

Trina Yost is one of them. Her 3-year-old son Courtland "loves coming to school" at the early education program at the Freedom Valley YMCA on North Adams Street. "He doesn't like to miss school, he loves it," said Yost.

Yost said she would not be able to afford the program were it not for the public and private funding which helps low-income families get this important step up in the early stages.

Funding cuts could also have some longer-term impacts.

One, not surprisingly, is educational. Assessment scores for students who have participated in PEAK programs are tracked and show those students have higher scores than those students who are not known to have had any early education support. That means more drop-outs and, ultimately, a higher cost to society.

“Every dollar spent on early education saves \$7 in the long run on services those kids end up needing from taxpayers,” including prison, said Jessica Vogt, director of quality assurance for the YMCA’s child care program.

Rieck said the PEAK program has collected testimonials from parents and one said her son was recognized as having symptoms of Asperger’s Syndrome and received early intervention.

“He’s doing amazingly well now and his therapists keep asking mom what she did, and she credits the teachers in her son’s pre-K program for recognizing the signs and getting him the help he needed early,” she said. “It definitely does make a difference.”

“The difference with the Pre-K counts program, specifically is there is so much parental involvement,” Vogt said.

“Families today can be so isolated from distant relatives, or even come from homes where there aren’t two parents in the household,” Vogt said. “Having this parent-involvement piece is really critical in the success these children can achieve in life; and making parents realize they are part of a community, that they are not alone and there are so many others out there just like them trying to do what’s best for their children.”

Added Vogt, “It just opens up a world to them that otherwise wouldn’t not be open to them without these partnerships.”

Another long-term impact of a funding cut, Rieck said, would be on the parents and the economy. Not only does the funding subsidizing low-income families allow their children access to quality early education, it also allows their parents to work, she explained.

“It would really affect the working poor, who can’t keep their jobs without child care,” Rieck said. “They’re caught in this cycle. They can’t get jobs without child care, but they can’t afford child care without help, so if they lose child care, they have to quit their jobs and then they’re back on public assistance. I’m not sure how that ends up saving any taxpayer money.”