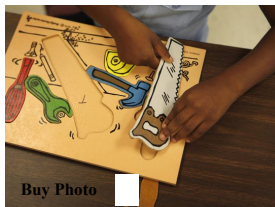


Early childhood education gets push



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10:35 a.m. EDT September 20, 2015



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(Photo: By Pat McDonogh, The CJ)

Every morning, preschool teacher Starr Logsdon pulls out her jar of “magic brain sprinkles” and pretends to dust each child in her classroom with the concoction, shaking the jar of confetti above their upturned faces.

The colorful droplets will help them learn, she tells them, allowing their brains to absorb all the information in her class at McFerran Preparatory Academy.

Logsdon’s enchanted confetti speaks to an issue that community leaders in Jefferson County are trying to tackle: how to help better prepare the area’s youngest learners.

Faced with an achievement gap that begins before students even start school and data that show only about half of the county’s kids are showing up prepared for kindergarten ([/story/news/education/2015/01/21/half-kindergarteners-ready-school/22114835/](http://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/education/2015/01/21/half-kindergarteners-ready-school/22114835/)), business leaders, public officials and philanthropists are looking to increase access to quality early childhood education.



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[Ask candidates how to make every child an asset](http://www.courier-journal.com/story/opinion/2015/09/16/ask-candidates-how-make-every-child-asset/32503655/)

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“The first five years (of a child’s life) are so important,” said Amy Neal, vice president of early care and education at Metro United Way in Louisville. “Investing early is a smart decision. It helps so much down the road.”

But giving the county’s youngest students a leg up is no easy feat. There is no overarching system in Jefferson County that sees the vast majority of preschool-aged children.

So a number of organizations, both public and private, are trying to band together to increase the number of children getting quality preschool learning.

The Greater Louisville Project — a nonpartisan civic initiative that uses data to look at pillars like health, jobs and education to see how to advance a competitive city — found that Jefferson County ranks fourth among 17 peer cities in the percentage of students attending private or public preschool (<http://greaterlouisvilleproject.org/deep-drivers/early-care/>).

But at the same time, fewer than half of the county’s students are being exposed to preschool, according to data it pulled from three-year estimates from the U.S. Census’ American Community Survey.

“We know that getting people into a high-quality preschool matters, but how do we get them into it and what are we going to do?” said Ben Reno-Weber, project director with the Greater Louisville Project.

He noted that a readiness test used by the state found that fewer than 52 percent of JCPS students were showing up at kindergarten with the basic tools they need to succeed ([/story/news/education/2015/01/21/half-kindergarteners-ready-school/22114835/](http://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/education/2015/01/21/half-kindergarteners-ready-school/22114835/)).

“The thing that I think is actually interesting is the way the community is coming together around that number,” Reno-Weber said.

Addressing the problem

Metro United Way has dubbed itself the “backbone organization” to try to rally different organizations around a cohesive strategy to create a better early childhood system. It and community partners have set a goal to increase the percentage of students deemed kindergarten-ready to 77 percent by 2020 (https://louisvilleky.gov/sites/default/files/safe_neighborhoods/vii_b_cradletocareerlouisville_0_5.pdf).

“Without an entity in charge, it’s really easy to be on different pages,” Neal said. “We are not going to do everything, but we’ll do a few things and do them well. ... We have to fail forward with this work.”

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JCPS removes hurdle to Head Start funding

[\(http://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/education/2015/09/11/jcps-removes-hurdle-head-start-funding/72074626/\)](http://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/education/2015/09/11/jcps-removes-hurdle-head-start-funding/72074626/)

For instance, over the summer, Metro United Way worked with JCPS after learning the district had dozens of open state-funded pre-K seats in its McFerran location on Seventh Street but that children in the community weren't filling the slots.

JCPS teachers began going door to door in the Park Hill, Lasalle and Algonquin neighborhoods, handing out about 500 fliers to let parents know their child may be eligible for state-funded pre-K offered at McFerran.

JCPS worked with community organizations to host two enrollment drives at the school, with JCPS' mobile application bus helping parents register and Metro United Way paying people to do the neighborhood canvassing and providing a pizza dinner for all attendees at the enrollment drives.

The result: Nearly every open early childhood seat at McFerran was filled for the fall.

"We've got more families receiving early childhood education in that area because of this work," said Karen Branham, JCPS' assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction. She said JCPS is looking at how it can replicate that enrollment drive in other areas of Louisville where the district has open early childhood seats.

Last year JCPS served 3,722 early childhood students, and set a goal this year to serve 4,338. So far it has about 4,000 students enrolled, according to numbers JCPS pulled last week.

The percentage of early-childhood students receiving full-day learning also stands at 77 percent, compared to 70 percent two years ago. While state-funded pre-K only pays for half-day classes, JCPS has been working to make more of the classes full-day at its own expense, saying the added time helps students.

"We have more kids in our program at the start of school than in the past seven years," said James Francis, JCPS' early childhood director.

The growth has been helped in part by opening early childhood classrooms in the former Presbyterian Community Center, which JCPS bought for \$1.5 million, on Hancock Street and shifting around other JCPS pre-K and Head Start classes to try to serve the most students in the most efficient way, Francis said.

Francis also credited the launch of a more user-friendly online application, which Francis said he helped develop after sitting with a parent and watching how difficult it was to go through the paper application.

Meanwhile, over the summer, JCPS partnered with the C.E. and S. Foundation — a private, nonprofit family foundation that has JCPS board Chairman David Jones Jr. as one of its officers — to host several summer Kindergarten Readiness Camps.

While JCPS has piloted summer-readiness camps in the past, this year it rolled the camps out to more than 300 students, hoping to increase the number of those students gaining key skills to succeed.

The results from the camps have not been released, but both JCPS and foundation officials said the results of increased kindergarten readiness are promising. The foundation said it hopes to continue its \$250,000 investment in the next couple of years, although it is hoping other philanthropic organizations will jump in to provide support and additional funding to help more children participate.

"You can't talk about educational success at the end of the ... pipeline with college completion without talking about early childhood education," said Tess McNair, the foundation's executive director.

Focusing on families, child care

The foundation also is partnering with the National Center for Families Learning to provide professional development to JCPS teachers to help deepen their understanding of how to use research-based strategies to help young students learn.

But it's not enough to just focus on preschool classes, advocates said. Efforts must also be made to reach the children who don't go to preschool but instead spend the day in a child-care facility or at home.

Those efforts can range from giving parents resources to help them talk to their students, to growing initiatives [like the Little Libraries](http://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/local/centralwest/2015/05/07/little-libraries-assist-early-education/70887870/) — which provide free books to students around the community — to working to make larger systemic changes.

Community Coordinated Child Care, or 4C, a Louisville-based child-care information and referral agency for families looking for child-care options, is working to help child-care providers improve the quality of education and care they offer to children in their programs.

"Since there is not a system like a public school system that directs what kind of curriculum should be used, then we do our best to provide our education and training" to child-care providers, executive director Janet Masterson said.

Masterson said 4C also is in talks with JCPS to determine how to provide some sort of blended preschool and child-care model to better accommodate working parents' schedules and to cut down on the number of transitions from place to place that students would have to make.

Advocates face a number of hurdles as they try to improve upon early childhood efforts in Jefferson County, not the least of which includes getting the necessary funding to provide access to more students. Money is needed to find space and to train and retain teachers, as well as to provide longer days or more hours of learning.



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Mayor praises preschool for reading

(<http://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/local/2015/09/04/mayor-fischer-touts-preschool-literacy/71711222/>)

Francis said that JCPS' early childhood teachers are often poached by elementary schools for K-5 work because the schools are able to offer better schedules or potentially more stability. He said that because of changes in available space, one group of JCPS early childhood teachers has had to move classrooms three years in a row.

"We're having challenges getting qualified staff across the board of early childhood," Francis said. He noted that the federal Head Start program does not require certified teachers, while state-funded pre-K does have that requirement. "Ultimately, our goal is to have a blended, five-day-a-week program with high-quality staff in every program, no matter what school you're in."

Steve Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research, said research shows that good-quality programs have a positive impact on young learners, not only cognitively, but long-term socially, emotionally and behaviorally.

"Does this solve all our problems? No, it's one arrow in the quiver," said Barnett, who has a doctorate in economics. "If you want to solve all of our fiscal problems, you're going to need a lot of arrows."

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