



BOWLING GREEN — Busy children offer a scene from a normal preschool day: two boys build a tower from assorted plastic triangles; two girls create a barnyard from a combination of toys, including plastic circus animals put out to pasture; children finish crafts with glue and markers while a girl and teacher eagerly discuss items in the toy kitchen.

At the Foundry Christian Community Center here, engaging children in a positive preschool experience is a major accomplishment. The center was built to help transform the area of town with the highest crime rate, widespread poverty and low education levels. Delivering quality experiences for children and families — the kind that are necessary for a healthy childhood — is a big step toward improving the possibilities of local residents.

Meanwhile, for the Warren County school district, the progress of young English language learners months after opening this satellite preschool classroom is greatly encouraging.

“Space is an issue for our preschool program; we don’t really have options for adding classroom space, especially in areas with large populations of English-language learners,” said Beth Schaeffer, preschool consultant for the Warren County district.

With preschool classrooms in many schools at or

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ABOVE: Children work in a preschool classroom operated by the Warren County schools located at the Foundry Christian Community Center in Bowling Green. The space, staff, and materials were funded by the state’s Preschool Partnership Grant, a two-year program approved by lawmakers in 2016.

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Grants Growing Quality: Preschool Partnership Funds Show Results| Continued

near capacity, the Preschool Partnership Grant program approved by Kentucky lawmakers in 2016 offered districts across the state a new opportunity: find new ways to collaborate with community preschool providers to provide more children and families high quality learning experiences. Lawmakers provided \$15 million in seed funding for the current two-year budget.

Here, the Warren County school district found an ideal partner in the Foundry, a nonprofit with the goal of creating strong services in an area with high numbers of vulnerable people that includes the West End of Bowling Green and neighborhoods in the Warren County district. The local community center offered half-day child care services and an afterschool program. The Preschool Partnership Grant provided almost \$128,000 over the past school year to furnish and staff a classroom at the Foundry that started the year with 12 Warren County preschoolers.

The Warren County grant allowed the school district to expand preschool for children facing language barriers while supporting a community agency intent on transforming a neighborhood with challenging needs. In Monroe County, it expanded access for parents eager for preschool services who might otherwise find themselves on a waiting list. And in Newport, the grant program was used to send highly trained preschool teachers into the community — to existing child care programs — to build the knowledge and capacity of providers while also increasing community awareness of preschool options.

Across the state, the first year of the grant funded 23 school districts and local child care providers. Awards averaging \$23,000 were aimed at building collaborative partnerships and developing plans for expanding full-day, high-quality preschool services. Another 46 grants, averaging about \$120,000, funded implementation of new collaborations or expansions of existing services for the most vulnerable children.

A separate round of funds will support programs in the coming year under the state's two-year allocation. Preschool officials and education leaders at several grant sites said that the preschool investment and emphasis on collaborating with local providers was a needed investment that is yielding strong results.

MONROE COUNTY: INCREASE ACCESS

"We have a waiting list that is endless," said Jamie England, director of the Wee Care Daycare Center in Monroe County, a district-operated child care facility able



to expand into a new site through its \$150,000 Preschool Partnership Grant. "This is a small county and we don't have factories here, so there are a lot of parents traveling outside the county to find work. There is a big need."

In Monroe County, the grant allowed Wee Care, limited to two rooms at Tompkinsville Elementary, to open up space at Gamaliel Elementary near the Tennessee border. The number of students served has jumped from about 50 to about 70 through the grant, which also funded two full-time employees and provided a new

curriculum and new books. The materials make up a new lending library to allow teachers and parents to check out and take home.

Changes over the past year prompted the center to take a closer look at students' kindergarten readiness skills and increase communication with parents about students' strengths and needs. The combination of resources the grant provided has boosted parent satisfaction and, England said, as well as gains in school readiness the center saw when it screened students in May and compared those results with the fall.

"The difference was tremendous," England said. "We have a very strong family engagement focus — our parents are the ones who do our recruiting for us — and parents' positivity has only increased since the grant. So many of them have told us about seeing a huge difference."

England said the increased focus on kindergarten readiness and more interaction with parents about how to help children at home have been important changes sparked by the state's grant. "It's been a blessing to us," she said.

NEWPORT: BUILD LOCAL CAPACITY

In Newport, a \$150,000 grant has been used by the school district to employ a retired kindergarten teacher and a certified preschool teacher to regularly visit several child care sites in the community. The duo trains preschool teachers by modeling lessons, providing on-site coaching, and sharing information about skills children need to be ready for kindergarten.

"We are building a community of teachers who can learn from each other," said Nichole Hayden, assistant principal at Newport Primary School, who has coordinated much of the work under the grant.

The grant paid for four days of training this summer attended by 18 teachers from two private child care centers, two centers operated by community groups, and a Head

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Start program. The training, focused on learning activities and assessment techniques, led to an ongoing “professional learning community” among the teachers at the five centers. The advisory work under the grant has also been aimed at improving the structure of the child care programs with hopes that they will earn improved status under the state’s five-star quality rating system after reviews this summer.

“The input of two people who are experts in the field of young children and the ability to work with others as a team has been very beneficial to everyone,” Hayden said.

The grant also built awareness and involvement in other ways, funding yard signs, a postcard mailer, and a brochure making parents more aware of preschool options. The teachers hired under the grant planned an open house for the Newport school district’s preschool, which drew a record crowd. The promotional work has continued, emphasizing preschool enrollment. The school also included preschool students as part of the districtwide annual “move up day” at the end of the school giving children a view of kindergarten.

A new Ready to Learn team was created that includes participants from Head Start programs, the public library, and other groups. All together, Hayden said, the grant has widely elevated quality preschool and kindergarten readiness across the community. “We want to make it part of our culture,” she added.

WARREN COUNTY: STRENGTHEN SUPPORTS

At the Foundry in Warren County, leaders want to capitalize on having a year or two before kindergarten to work with students on readiness. While Schaeffer said students have made gains on kindergarten screening in the past year — and some have gone from speaking almost no English to being able to easily converse — many students start preschool far behind the expectations of kindergarten-readiness screenings.

“We want to look at these students’ third-grade reading scores,” Schaeffer said. “They are not going to test ‘ready’ yet, but they are going to test ‘readier’ because they participated — we can help them make up two years in 10 months, but many children start four years behind.”

For leaders of the Foundry, funded locally by the United Methodist Church and the United Way, offering a mix of services for pregnant mothers and young families, high quality child care, preschool and afterschool



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programs, the neighborhood center offers a range of supports for families who often lack basic resources like reliable transportation, someone to care for children, or help in financial emergencies. Its programming for children is free as long family members attend a series of parent education events, which often include a meal and time for bonding with neighbors and volunteers.

“I used to be an old gal who said, ‘Pull yourself up by the bootstraps.’ What God’s taught me is that when you don’t have any bootstraps, what are you going to pull up?” said Susan McCloud, director of the Foundry and a veteran principal in the Bowling Green schools. “We are

helping people with nothing to draw on about how to raise kids.”

Schaeffer said the Preschool Partnership Grant is reaching children with deep needs. “It’s just phenomenal to me the progress these children are making,” Schaeffer said. “They started out with behavioral issues or struggling with English, and now, they can’t wait to tell you what’s going on in their life or their classroom.”

A GROWING LOCAL PRIORITY

Veteran Kentucky educators see expanded preschool programs and stronger collaboration with local providers as key elements of increasing student achievement.

“When I was principal at Roundstone Elementary 25 years ago, it became clear to me that academic success in school truly does start in those early years,” said David Pensol, now the superintendent of the Rockcastle County school district. “I did not have to see a lot of research to believe it — we saw it every day.”

While Rockcastle County was not a grant recipient, Pensol said local preschool enhancements became a top priority after funding all-day kindergarten. Lawmakers and education advocates would be wise to find new ways to expand access and improve programs, he said.

“I truly believe the future success of the Rockcastle County Schools and our community lies within our ability to be innovative in developing programming and strategies to enhance early learning,” Pensol said. “Our goal is to further develop our early childhood program to be inclusive of partnerships and resources that will enable us to increase the intensity and duration of services, while providing comprehensive care and implementing best practices and ideas. We want to provide the absolute best possible early-learning environment for our children.”



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