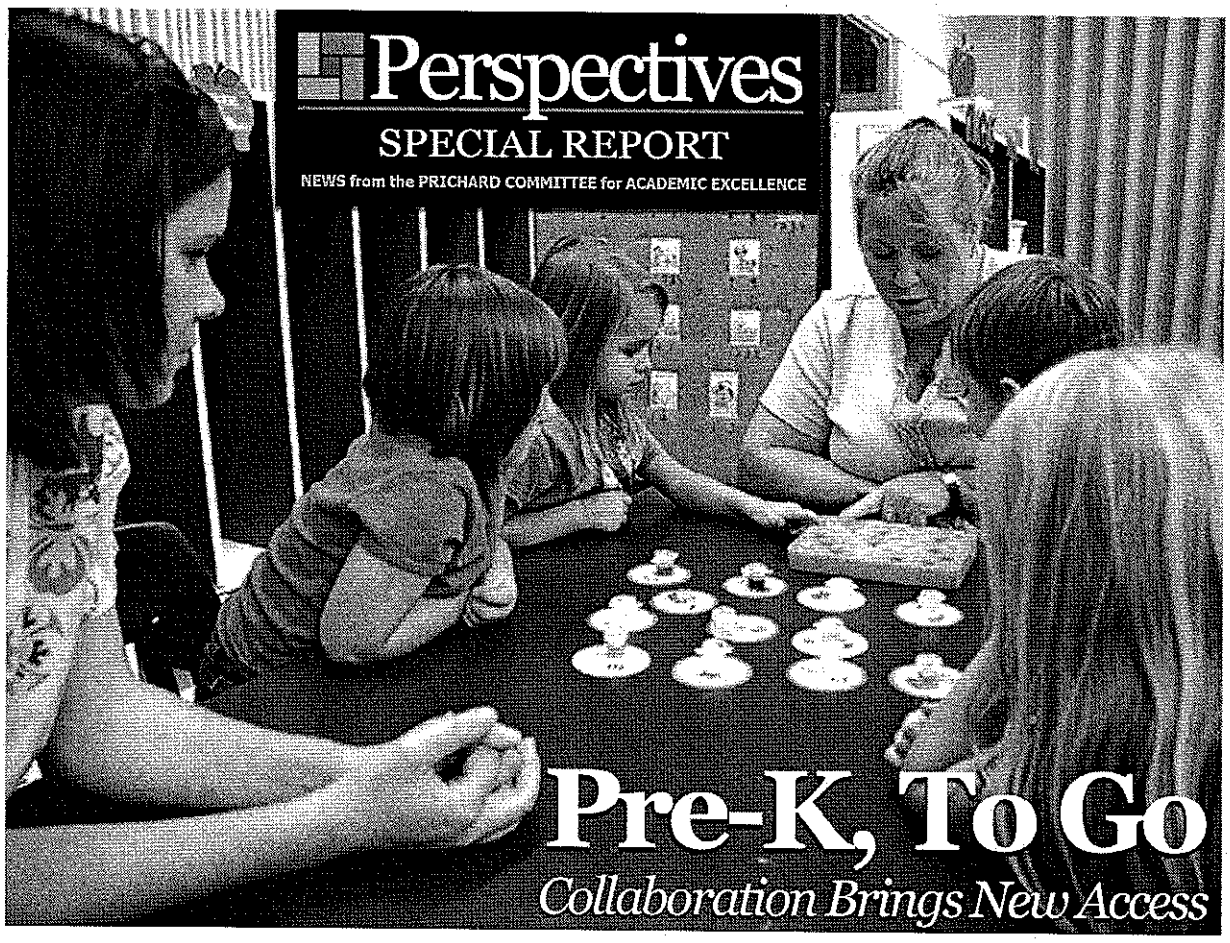


Pre-K, To Go

Collaboration Brings New Access

HOPKINSVILLE, Ky. — Beverly Campbell's pre-k classroom is made to fit in tote bags.

For the past two years, the veteran early childhood educator has hit the road, delivering public school pre-k lessons at a pair of day care centers here. In innovative partnerships, the Christian County school system is placing pre-k teachers in a handful of child care centers to reach more three- and four-year-olds eligible for state-funded pre-k programs and, at the same time, build quality and rapport with private child care providers.

Campbell said that while it's harder to feel like she's in a classroom all her own, her "preschool on wheels" gives children a top-quality experience and builds the skills of the child care workers who assist her.

"I didn't know if I would, but I really like it," Campbell said. "We're doing the same things they do in a school's pre-k classroom, I just have to bring the materials with me."

The colorful open classroom at the Hopkinsville Let's Go Play Academy, where Campbell leads an afternoon pre-k class, is a home-grown example of collaboration that is widening access to quality pre-k programs at a time when space is limited, budgets

CONTINUED

ABOVE: Christian County pre-k teacher Beverly Campbell works with students at the Hopkinsville Let's Go Play Academy as center worker Shanna Grayson looks on.

KEEPING THE FOCUS ON KENTUCKY SCHOOLS

This Perspectives Special Report is part of the Prichard Committee's newsletter, now in its 20th year. We hope you'll find our reports, delivered by e-mail, another useful way to keep up with issues facing Kentucky schools. Go to www.prichardcommittee.org or e-mail us at admin@prichardcommittee.org to add your name to our e-mail list.

Pre-K To Go: Collaboration Brings New Access | Continued

are tight, and many young children spend the months leading up to schools in a variety of child care settings. For Christian County school leaders, building partnerships is the best strategy for making sure more children arrive at school ready to learn.

On an early fall afternoon, Campbell moves children through a variety of learning activities: building a puzzle, finger painting, and a matching game of pairing smells with pictures by sniffing tiny containers. The game prompts lots of laughs and conversation. As Campbell teaches, day care worker Shanna Grayson, watches and helps.

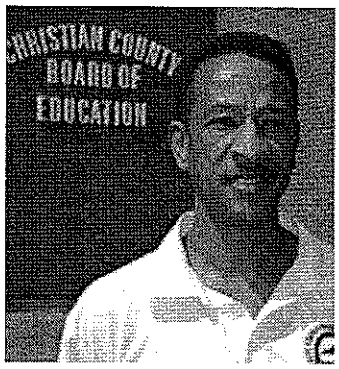
Grayson said that two years working alongside Campbell has not only helped students learn more, but made her a better classroom leader.

"It has definitely improved my organization skills, and it gives me a better idea of what the school system wants to see from four- and five-year-olds," Grayson said.

Two years ago, the Christian County program was envisioned as a winning proposition on several fronts: day care centers provide space the school system lacks to serve more preschool students. The arrangements cut out transportation costs for the district. In addition, keeping the centers' workers in the rooms with teachers gives students extra attention. Meanwhile, working alongside a certified teacher helps the centers' staff grow professionally while giving operators new resources and a selling point. The arrangements also diffuse some of the competitive tension that has grown since the state started funding pre-k for four-years-olds. On all counts, those involved in Christian County said the experiment is succeeding.

"From a business point of view, when the state started talking about funding preschool, we all panicked and thought, 'Here go our four-year-olds and some three-year-olds into the school system,' " said Lynn "Boogie" (pronounced BOO-jee) Morris, who owns two Hopkinsville centers that partner with the Christian County schools.

Kentucky's pre-k program hasn't been catastrophic for her centers. She also owns a child care center in Glasgow and one in Trigg County. But Morris added that it is difficult to operate a child care center if the pool of children doesn't include four-year-olds. Indeed, every time an elementary school expands and builds more pre-k classrooms, Morris said, child care owners cringe in anticipation of the financial hit they will see.



'Each school district is going to have to take the bull by the horns and find a way to make early childhood education happen.'

— Darryl Lynch, Christian County school board

'We're doing the same things they do in a school's pre-k classroom, I just have to bring the materials with me.'

— Beverly Campbell, Christian County pre-k teacher

She called collaboration a new ray of hope.

Morris is excited about the results she has seen. She describes one veteran child care teacher who has been inspired working alongside Beverly Campbell. "I always thought Miss Joyce was an awesome teacher, but after six weeks, she was talking about getting her child development associate degree because of seeing Miss Beverly and learning so many new ways to get her points across to the children."

Patty Grable, the director of special education and preschool for the Christian County schools, said the new partnerships are working well. In 2007-08, the year before the program started, the district served 309 eligible pre-k students. This year, that number is up to 377, with the collaboration program accounting for most of the growth. Additionally, this year the district serves 35 pre-k students at local expense because their families don't meet eligibility requirements for the state-funded program.

"In our school district, it clicked that we have to really look at what we're doing early

on if we want to raise achievement and address gaps," she said. "There have already been so many benefits. It really has been good for everyone."

In launching the first three partnerships last year, the district made sure it could achieve a 10:1 student-teacher ratio to make the program cost effective. This year, it added two more sites — a Head Start center and a child care center in a location where young students were spending the most time riding the school bus.

Darryl Lynch, a member of the Christian County school board, said the extensive evidence showing the educational benefits of top-quality pre-k programs makes pre-k expansion a top priority. "I've done my homework, and all the information out there is saying the same thing — it works," he said of strong pre-k education. He said he has personally seen the difference between his own children, who got solid pre-k learning experiences, and their peers who didn't. "On top of that, it's the minority children and poor children who get the brunt" of missing out on high-quality pre-k.

"We can pick up a lot of those kids who experience an achievement gap if we build a system that has a habit of strong early childhood education for all," Lynch said.

Collaboration is getting increasing attention as a strategy for expanding pre-k programs across Kentucky — and nationwide.

■ In May, the Strong Start Kentucky Symposium on Collaborative Early Childhood Programs highlighted lessons from collaborative programs in Illinois, Tennessee, and West Virginia while exploring the prospects for new public-private pre-k links in Kentucky.

Setting aside turf issues and building strong relationships between the leaders of local organizations or centers that serve young children are key steps toward collaborative programs, speakers at the May symposium said. Collaborative efforts can also be an opportunity to work beyond learning experiences to address improvements in staffing, data collection, nutrition, and safety issues in community pre-k settings, said Brenda Benford, director of pre-k programs for the Hamilton County, Tenn., school system. Private partners must meet quality requirements in all of those areas to participate in the Chattanooga program, she explained.

■ This spring, the state Early Childhood Development Authority that oversees the KIDS NOW program moved to fund two demonstration projects to test collaboration strategies. In announcing the projects, the agency said collaboration will be essential to any expansion of pre-k programs, and that the state should use pilot programs to learn lessons that can be applied if more funding becomes available.

Groups in Anderson County and Fayette County will match the $100,000 in state funds and develop team approaches involving state funded preschool programs, Head Start classrooms, and local child care centers. The goal of the two-year project is to get high quality services to more children.

The state hopes to announce funding for two more demonstration sites this fall, said Mary Howard, a branch manager in the state education department's division of early childhood development.

Lynch, the Christian County school board member, noted that until funding arrives from Frankfort or Washington, the state should encourage more districts to explore innovative ways to increase pre-k participation with existing resources.

"Each school district is going to have to take the bull by the horns and find a way to make early childhood education happen," he said. "For the investment, we can get so much out of this."

"I build houses," Lynch added. "So I know that you build from the foundation up."

Kentucky early childhood facts

PRE-K CHILDREN ENROLLED IN STATE-FUNDED PROGRAMS IN 2008:

24,251

includes children who met eligibility criteria and children served through district funds or tuition.

STUDENTS ENROLLED IN KENTUCKY HEAD START PROGRAMS IN 2008:

13,663

PRE-K STATE BUDGET:

$75.1 million

in fiscal 2009

FURTHER READING:

Pre-k Now, a national campaign of the Pew Center on the States, published a report in July titled "Beyond the School Yard: Pre-K Collaborations with Community-Based Partners."

■ Get the report at preknow.org/documents/pkn_collaboration_rept_final.pdf