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BRAIN GAIN

Preschool can elevate the lives of disadvantaged kids

by [Joe Sullivan](#)

Over the next week Kathleen Mills will hold a laminated card in front of each of the 16 youngsters in her kindergarten class at Christenberry Elementary School. On the card are the letters of the alphabet displayed in random order, and Ms. Mills will ask each of her students to identify as many letters as they can.

It's only one component of a literacy assessment that is administered to every entering kindergartner in Knox County. But the analysis of Mike Winstead, coordinator of research and evaluation at Knox County Schools, tells him it's the single most telling one. "We've found that the ability to recognize letters relates most closely to the ability to read by the end of the year, which is our goal," Winstead says. "For those students who recognize less than 10 letters, it's dicey whether they're going to be able to meet the goal."

Distressingly, about 1,000 of the 4,000 youngsters entering kindergarten in Knox County schools each year fall short of the 10-letter mark, and about half of them never recover from this deficit in terms of reading proficiency in subsequent years. Hence, it's a deficit that will cost them dearly for the rest of their lives.

But just how are preschoolers supposed to learn their alphabets and a host of other cognitive and social skills that are important to their success in school and later life?

For the big majority, the answer starts at home with nurturing parents who converse with their children, read to their children and otherwise stimulate their development. For those

who can afford it, there are also private preschools with tuitions that vary widely but often run \$450 per month or more. Of the 222 child care centers in Knox County that are registered with the state, most offer pre-school learning activities of one sort or another, according to a roster furnished by the State Department of Human Services.

But what about the children of poverty whose typically single parents often lack the orientation or aptitude for child mentoring in the home and can't afford to pay for it outside? For them, the answer lies in publicly funded pre-school programs that, educators believe, can go a long way toward making up for other deficiencies.

To be effective such programs must provide a whole lot more than typical child care centers. Hence, the state's Families First program that covers the cost of child care for mothers who are transitioning from welfare to work is not viewed as part of the solution by specialists in early child care education. "To help the child who is behind in every way at ages three and four and will not have the skills to be ready to learn in kindergarten, you've got to have highly qualified staff trained in the techniques of working with these children," says Jan Bushing, who specializes in this field at the state Department of Education. "To compare the [Families First] child care program with preschool is going to be comparing apples and oranges."

There are two preschool programs for the disadvantaged in Knox County, both federally funded. One is conducted by Knox County Schools, serving about 350 three- and four-year-olds at two sites in East Knoxville. The other is Project Head Start with 900 enrollees at six sites dispersed throughout the county. Of the combined total of 584 participants in both programs who are entering kindergarten this fall, administrators are confident that the vast majority know their alphabets and are well prepared for school in many other ways.

A visit to the Fair Garden Family and Community Resource Center makes it easy to see why. There, the eight youngsters assembled on the Learning Rug in Dollie Griffin's classroom are all attentive as she animatedly reads to them from a picture book held out so they can view its pages also. The rug itself is made up of concentric circles with the alphabet surrounded by numbers, colors, and words like bird, car, apple and fish, each accompanied by a picture.

Then Ms. Griffin turns on a boom box, and all the kids join in singing and acting out a song composed by Thomas Moore, a consultant to Knox County's early education program. "Stand up, turn around, shake your head, bend your knee" go the lyrics. And each of the kids does all of the above with gusto before heading for lunch at the learning center's cafeteria.

The preschool day starts at 7:30 a.m. with breakfast (nutrition being one of its emphases) and extends to 2:30 p.m. with nap time in between. Each of Fair Garden's eight classes is taught by a certified teacher, supported by a salaried teaching assistant and a volunteer foster grandparent. Each of the children gets bus transportation to and from school. (After

care is available until 6 p.m., but parents must provide transportation for children who stay after regular school hours.)

Nor does Fair Garden's mission end with the school day. "We put great emphasis on empowering parents," says Marilyn Davidson, its principal. "We have lots of workshops showing them techniques to use at home, and we want all families to have library cards and to use them."

Clarshedria Hardin, who has two children in the program, attests to that. "They help us think of lots of different ways to interact with our children at home and how to deal with different situations," she says. Among them: how to get the children involved in making food, how to help them get along with younger siblings and how to deal with temper tantrums. "Fair Garden has not only prepared my son for kindergarten, it's helped me become a better parent," says Hardin, a single mother who lives in East Knoxville and works as a loader at UPS.

Any child who lives in what's known as Title I school zone is eligible to participate in the Fair Garden program or its counterpart at the Sam E. Hill School. The term is derived from Title I of a federal aid-to-education statute that sets eligibility criteria for its meal program. In Knox County, the 14 center city elementary school zones with the highest concentration of low-income households qualify as Title I.

Lois McSwine, who oversees Title I programs for Knox County Schools, stresses the importance of preschool. "Brain research shows that's where you reach children when they are most ready to learn, and if don't reach them then, too many are going to be left behind," she says. With a little over \$1 million in federal funding, Fairview and Sam E. Hill have a combined capacity of 336 students, but the 154 who are entering kindergarten this fall only account for a small fraction of the total kindergarten enrollment of about 760 at the 14 Title I schools.

Head Start may account for many more, but the program doesn't track which elementary schools its 430 entering kindergartners are attending. With a budget of \$7 million, 200 employees and 900 kids enrolled in Knox County, Head Start is the nation's prototypical pre-school program for the poor, dating back to 1965. Eligibility is limited strictly to families with incomes below the federal poverty line, but Head Start's Joyce Farmer stresses that this encompasses families throughout the county—by no means just the center city.

The doughty Farmer has been associated with Head Start since its inception and its local director since 1973. She remains a fervent champion of the program's multi-faceted mission even as it's coming under fire from the Bush administration for allegedly not placing enough emphasis on preparing kids to read.

"We don't just do education; we do family training, health and social services, nutrition, whatever it takes to help the most disadvantaged kids from the most dysfunctional families," Farmer emphasizes. But at the same time she's proud of the program's record in

preparing kids for school. "The last few years Head Start has really focused on literacy, and we've got a lot to show for it."

McSwine agrees: "Head Start here is an excellent program," she says.

Still, the Bush administration is pushing for changes. Initially, it called for disbanding the program altogether and transferring all its funding to the states for incorporation into state-run preschool programs. Now, it's only proposing to do so in eight still undesignated states on a pilot basis. The legislation authorizing this change as well as imposing academic standards on children who remain in Head Start is embroiled in congressional controversy.

"We're afraid that a massive push for testing preschoolers for literacy will come at a terrible cost to the children in terms of behavior and motivation," Farmer says. "That doesn't mean that we're opposed to measuring and accountability, but we're against trying to make kids into automatons."

A visit to Head Start's East Knox Center near the zoo reveals a lot in common with the county's Fair Garden Center. The 15 students in Kim Moore's classroom are seated in a circle, all seemingly engrossed as her teaching assistant reads from a picture book *The Tadpole Who Turned Into a Frog*. "Does the tadpole have legs?" she asks. "No," the kids all answer in unison. As she turns the page that reveals a frog, she asks, "Now what has he got?" And the answer comes back, "legs."

As the children prepare to head to the playground, they are asked to stand up as the first letter of their name is called. "S," brings Sabrina and Shannon to their feet; "B," begets Briana and Brianca; "M," Mason and so forth until they are all lined up in a row. Then they are asked to count off their position in the line, and the numbers come popping back from one to 15.

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For all its reach, Head Start can't begin to cover all the children who apply, let alone all who are eligible for the program. Farmer says she receives 1200 to 1500 applications

annually from an eligibility pool she estimates at 2500 or more. In selecting the 900 enrollees, "We try to serve the neediest," she says.

Neither Head Start nor the Title I program are for kids with severe developmental delays or disabilities. These are served by a Knox County Special Education program known as Child Find. As its name implies, Child Find seeks out the incapacitated and infirm at age 3 through solicited referrals from the Knox County Health Department, pediatricians and child care centers as well as parents and others. The program assesses about 300 children each year at the Fort Sanders Development Center and assigns most of them to Special Education classes tailored to their needs. There are 12 classrooms at Fort Sanders and 25 more at elementary schools dispersed throughout the county, each staffed with a certified teacher, a teaching assistant and in some cases other specialists. When the children reach kindergarten age, most are "mainstreamed" into elementary schools in the zone in which they live, but each child has an individual program of instruction that often involves Special Education components.

The Title I preschool program, McSwine says, is for "just your average kid."

While volume upon volume has been written stressing the importance of early childhood education, there's surprisingly little data on how disadvantaged kids who've come through preschool programs have fared in subsequent years. Winstead says he's working on a study in conjunction with UT's Child Development Center that would "look at how these kids progress in kindergarten." But it's still in a formative stage and wouldn't attempt to track their progress over a longer span of time.

The closest thing to an evaluation of pre-school benefits in Tennessee was conducted under the aegis of the State Board of Education. It took a significant subset of the 3,000 four year-olds who entered the state's pilot preschool program in 1999 and then measured their performance at the end of first grade in 2001-02.

"At-risk students who participated in a full year of preschool scored higher than the state average for all students," reports the state board's executive directive, Douglas Wood. By contrast, at-risk students without preschool scored significantly lower than the state average.

Nationally, the study that gets most often cited was conducted by Craig Ramey and Sharon Landesman Ramey, directors of the Georgetown University Center on Health and Education. Known as the ABC study, it tracked the long-term benefits of an early childhood program for a group of highly disadvantaged youngsters in North Carolina, starting in 1970's. "Essentially, the ABC preschool program 'leveled the playing field' for these children by supporting their performance to be at slightly above the national average," the Rameys report.

Progress of the children throughout their school years and into early adulthood was compared to a group of similarly situated children in a control group who did not participate in the program. Among the study's findings:

"For children in the control group, almost half (48 percent) were placed in Special Education by age 15 (often after repeated academic failures and social adjustment problems) compared to only 12 percent of those in the ABC preschool group." The national average for Special Education placement is about 11 percent, the Rameys note.

When the children reached age 21, "Almost 70 percent of those who received the preschool treatment were engaged in skilled jobs (above entry level positions) or enrolled in higher education in contrast to only 40 percent of those in the control group."

However, the ABC program started when the children were three months old, continuing until they entered kindergarten. The Rameys' work, along with many other studies, put great stress on children's vocabulary development by the time they reach age 3. In their book "Meaningful Differences," Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley conclude that vocabulary deficiencies at that age are extremely difficult to overcome. Hence, programs like Head Start and its counterparts might more aptly be labeled catch-ups.

Head Start has recently launched an Early Head Start program that starts at age six months. But funding is only available for 34 children in the program locally at this timewith little or no increase in sight. Knox County Schools Superintendent Charles Lindsey envisioned an extensive birth-to-kindergarten program as part of his "World Class Schools" initiative. But all there is to show for it at present is a pilot program at Belle Morris Elementary School that reaches 50 families in that school zone. Under the program, a specially trained teacher visits parents in their home, typically once a month. She brings a book and parenting materials and works with the parents on how to read with rather than to their children as well as on behavioral matters such as potty training. The visits can also lead to referrals to a social worker or the school nurse for children with special needs. But parents of the most disadvantaged kids tend to be the least responsive to the program according to Sharon Roberts, Belle Morris' principal for the past eight years.

Neither Knox County, nor the state, nor even the federal government is seemingly able or willing to provide any additional funding for preschool programs at this time. Wood, Bushing, and other state education officials had been banking on getting a big increase from the proceeds of the state lottery that's due to be up and running early next year.

The constitutional amendment that authorized the lottery contemplated allocations for preschools, but these allocations were made secondary to funding college scholarships. By the time the state Legislature got through broadening eligibility criteria for these scholarships this past session there won't be any money left over for pre-school in the foreseeable future per projections by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission. Ironically, Tennessee's lottery was supposed to be patterned after Georgia's where, in addition to college scholarships, lottery proceeds fund a universal preschool program open to all four-year-olds in the state.

Nor does the heralded federal "No Child Left Behind" law provide much impetus for strengthening the learning skills of disadvantaged preschoolers. Instead, its emphasis is

on measuring the reading and math progress of students in grades three through eight. For schools that aren't making "adequate annual progress," per state-set standards, the law calls for remedial action.

But many education specialists believe that remediation at these grade levels comes too late to make up for deficiencies in many instances. "It would be a whole lot better if they were reached as three and four-year-olds rather than eight- or nine-year-olds," says Winstead.

Bushing laments that "Congress didn't really address pre-K in No Child Left Behind." She cites extensive research showing that "the only way you are going to get meaningful, sustainable improvements in a child's learning abilities is by reaching them early on. That window is closing at age three or four, and if you're going to make it happen, you've got to make it happen then. I've seen so many quality remedial programs that tried so hard but never got lasting results."

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