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## Year of the preschooler

Statewide efforts could make Kansas a leader in preparing kids for school

BY SUZANNE PEREZ TOBIAS  
The Wichita Eagle

Some of the most important players in this year's legislative session are squishing fingerpaint, wearing princess crowns, singing "Itsy Bitsy Spider" and learning to cut their food.

They're not in the Capitol building in Topeka. They're in homes, child-care centers and preschools all over the state. They pay attention to Elmo, not the news.

But their welfare -- in particular, their education -- is gaining attention from many of the state's movers and shakers. In fact, some experts say 2007 might just turn out to be the Year of the Preschooler.

One landmark push is Gov. Kathleen Sebelius' \$2 million pre-K pilot initiative, which will serve 600 children in six counties, including about 100 in Sedgwick County. With critical backing from some of the state's largest business interests, the initiative could be the starting point for a high-quality pre-K program that serves every 4-year-old in the state.

"We're quite excited about what's happening in Kansas," said Libby Doggett, executive director of Pre-K Now, a group that tracks preschool initiatives across the country.

"Your pre-K pilot program... is near the top in terms of meaningful initiatives. When it's fully phased-in and if quality standards are met, it will be among the top (programs) in the country."

Kansas certainly has room for improvement. A statewide study released last year showed that more than half of Kansas kids start kindergarten unprepared to learn. And a new Education Week report ranks Kansas among the lowest in the country in per-capita spending on early-childhood programs.

While New Jersey provided more than \$9,000 per child in 2005, Kansas spent less than \$2,000. The U.S. average per-capita spending on pre-schoolers is \$3,551.

Doggett and other early-childhood advocates say Kansas has a long way to go before it, like Oklahoma, offers voluntary, state-funded pre-K to all 4-year-olds. But several signs point to a growing momentum toward that goal. In addition to the pre-K pilot program:

- The Kansas Health Foundation is preparing to launch a statewide television and radio campaign focused on the benefits of early-childhood education for all children, not just those living in poverty.
- Visioneering Wichita has made early-childhood education one of its five primary goals. The group's birth-to-kindergarten alliance hopes to unify and strengthen the lobbying efforts of dozens of area agencies that serve young children.
- Rainbows United recently announced plans to build a \$3.7 million, state-of-the-art early childhood center at K-96 and Oliver.
- Wichita CARES (Children Able to Read will Excel in School), a partnership of school and health officials, has served almost twice the number of children as originally planned. Early studies show participants are scoring higher than their peers on preschool evaluations.
- And the Opportunity Project, or TOP, an early-education program with schools in Oaklawn and northeast Wichita, has become a national model for how to turn at-risk kids into confident, prepared kindergartners.

"The whole landscape around early-childhood is changing," said Janice Suzanne Smith, TOP's executive director. "It kind of gives me chills. I think 2007 is going to be an exciting year."

### Why the push?

A growing body of research indicates that intensive, high-quality preschools can improve children's school readiness and prevent many of society's ills.

According to an Education Week report released last week, children who attend preschool are less likely to drop out of school, repeat grades or need special education than those who don't attend preschool. As adults, they are less likely to commit crimes, more likely to be employed and more likely to earn higher wages.

Some studies show that for every \$1 spent on pre-K, \$7 is returned in the form of increased earning capacity, lower crime rates and savings on remedial services at schools.

Recent research on brain development shows that more than 85 percent of a child's core brain structure is formed by age 5, with the majority being formed before the third birthday.

However, Kansas traditionally has steered education funds toward K-12 programs, leaving preschools to rely on a hodgepodge of federal and local funds, grants, private contributions and tuition fees.

"We need to get the message to people that 3-year-olds aren't just sweet and cute," said Marni Vliet, director of the Kansas Health Foundation. "They're at this magical period where their brains develop at such a rate, it's just phenomenal.

"This is the time to think about flip-flopping where we put our resources. If we start to focus on the beginning of the cycle instead of the end, we wouldn't be in the Band-Aid business. We'd be in the prevention business."

## **Piecing it together**

But investing in early childhood education -- with preschools that feature small classes, hot meals and teachers with bachelor's degrees, as experts recommend -- takes money.

Exactly how much lawmakers may be asked to add or shift to preschool programs this year is uncertain, at least until Gov. Sebelius releases her proposed budget this week.

Jim Redmon, executive director of the Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund, said he hasn't seen the budget yet. But since Sebelius made early-childhood education a rallying cry of last fall's re-election campaign, "I imagine there will be some things in there related to pre-K," he said.

"Our vision is still the vision we've talked about for a long time, and that's to make Kansas the best place in the country to raise a child," he said. "To do that, as we're seeing from more and more research, you have to start early."

Teaching young children effectively and efficiently will require more than public money, Redmon said. While many public schools and government-funded Head Start centers offer pre-K, the majority of youngsters -- more than 90 percent of the state's 225,500 children under 5 -- attend home-based or private preschools, or stay with family members.

Depending on schools to begin educating all preschoolers would be slow, if not impossible -- and probably unwise, Redmon said.

"We're not talking about just earlier kindergarten," Redmon said. "We want a mix of pre-K sites, whether that's at a school, a child care center, a private preschool, a church.... It's like a puzzle -- it fits together, but we have a lot of work yet to do to make it fit together seamlessly."

## **Ready for kindergarten**

The Opportunity Project is one program trying to fit the pieces together in Wichita. The project's two schools operate with funds from the Wichita and Derby public schools, Head Start, state agencies and private contributors including businessman Barry Downing, the Kansas Health Foundation and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

The schools are based in part on schools in Reggio Emilia, an Italian village known worldwide for its success in teaching preschoolers, as well as on successful preschool programs in the United States.

One recent morning, students in Wayna Buch's class at the northeast Wichita TOP center sang, danced and counted marbles before sitting down to a family-style lunch.

Between bites of breaded pork chops and several attempts -- some successful, some not -- at opening their ketchup packets, the children talked about a book called "Chicka Chicka 1-2-3," and about their futures.

"When we go to kindergarten," said 4-year-old Daylon Terrell, "we'll be good. We're learning colors and letters and counting."

"And criss-cross-applesauce -- and the Zero Voice Song," added Hayden Hutchinson. (Teachers, Hayden explained, sometimes ask for "zero voices," so you need to know how to sit quietly, with your hands in your lap.)

For more than half of Kansas kindergartners, starting school behind their peers doesn't mean not reading or being able to count to 100, said Emile McGill, Wichita's director of early-childhood education.

It means not knowing how to hold a pencil or crayon, not knowing how to follow directions, not knowing how to get in a single-file line. Teachers see such learning gaps firsthand, and they affect the entire class.

"I would love to see pre-K in every elementary building," said Cindy Ellington, a teaching coach at the Wichita school district's Little Early Childhood Center, one of the state's pre-K pilot sites. "It's such a big step for these little guys."

## Seeing a difference

When Nanci Olivas moved to Wichita two years ago with her 4-year-old son and 1-year-old twins, she worried about her children's care. The single mother had visited some child care facilities -- and heard of many others -- where children watched television for much of the day.

Someone told her about the TOP center in Oaklawn, so she went for a visit. Most of her children's care, she learned, could be financed through SRS and private grants.

"It looked so clean, so secure, more like a school than a day care," said Olivas, 26. "I knew right away I wanted my kids there."

Two years later, her oldest son, Abraham, is excelling -- and, more important, having fun, she said -- in kindergarten at Colvin Elementary School. The twins attend TOP and already know their letters and numbers.

Olivas said she talked to another mother recently who didn't want to send her children to preschool because she feared they would "get bored" with school.

"I told her, 'You don't know the mistake you're making,' " Olivas said. "The kids learn, they have fun, they love it, and it gets them ready for kindergarten."

Teresa Rupp, executive director of Child Start (formerly the Child Care Association of Wichita/Sedgwick County), said the best thing that could happen this year is for early-childhood advocates to join forces and speak with a unified voice.

"I think there's strength in numbers, and I think many of us are finally saying, 'How can we do this better? How can we join forces? How do we make a dent?' " Rupp said.

"Through the years there have been so many voices saying this is important, and maybe it's coming to critical mass," she said. "People are talking about it and caring about it, and that's got to be a good thing."

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