

DPS looks to add to pre-K offerings

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DURHAM – With about 650 children on a waiting list for pre-kindergarten classes provided by either Durham Public Schools, Head Start centers or private NC Pre-K sites, the school district is looking to better meet the needs of the very youngest of learners.

The expansion is part of the strategic plan presented nearly a year ago by Superintendent Eric Becoats. Since then, six classes have already been added to the district's pre-K programs on the campuses of 19 elementary schools, with one more being added this month. Next year, the plan is for the district to add another six pre-K classes at a dedicated site, possibly the Staff Development Center on Hillandale Road.

Eunice Sanders, assistant superintendent for student support services, told the school board this week that the 650-name-long waiting list might not even include all of the children who would be eligible for Title I, exceptional children, NC Pre-K and School Improvement Grant (SIG) classrooms. To better reach eligible families, Sanders is working on a marketing strategy with the district's public affairs office.

The district is legally required to offer services to all children identified as exceptional children by age 3, and as of Wednesday, the district was serving 338 pre-K EC students. The district also now serves about 250 children who qualify for Title I, NC Pre-K and School Improvement Grant funding. The district also offers pre-K classes, as part of the Montessori curriculum, to 60 children at George Watts Montessori Elementary school and 40 children at Morehead Montessori Elementary School.

The interest in adding pre-K classes comes on the heels of this summer's 20 percent cut to the state's More at Four – the program now known as NC Pre-K – budget.

However, in part to help offset that reduction, Durham voters in November approved a quarter-cent sales tax, a portion of which will go to support Durham's Partnership for Children, which is the local NC Pre-K agency. Becoats said there's a possibility that some funds from first three months of tax revenue – which isn't accounted for – could be put to use in the pre-K expansion. The district would have to go to the county for that.

If a pre-K program were to move into the Staff Development Center in 2012-13, it would likely assume the White Building, which was most recently used as a temporary home for Lakewood Montessori Middle School.

Hugh Osteen, assistant superintendent for operational services, reported that an architect estimated that it would take about \$250,000 just to "spruce it up and get in the door." In addition to that, there would be work related to food services and playground and site work that would bring the total to somewhere between \$500,000 and \$750,000.

That would make the site functional and safe, but not at the license or showcase level, he warned. School board members Natalie Beyer and Minnie Forte-Brown expressed reservations about not “doing it right.”

Forte-Brown asked that district officials crunch the numbers to see what it would take to create a five-star center.

The district is now working toward licensure by the N.C. Division of Child Development and Early Education in its Title I, NC Pre-K and SIG classrooms, partly because “it’s the right thing to do,” said Leonie Gill, administrator of the district’s preschool program. “We’re adhering to high standards for our children.”

Licensure is also a requirement for maintaining NC Pre-K funding. The district will not pursue licensure of its exceptional children classrooms.

To help offset the costs associated with the expansion, Sanders proposed that the district make 24 of the 90 slots at the dedicated center available, for a fee, to children who do not qualify for Title I, exceptional children, NC Pre-K or SIG classrooms. The proposed fee is \$600 a month, below Durham’s market rate of \$766 a month.

The fee-for-service model has been used successfully in Johnston County, although that county limits the service to employees’ children. The Durham service would be available to all children through an admission lottery.

One potential problem with having so many pre-K children at one location is transportation, said Scott Denton, executive director of transportation for the district. Young children need seat restraints, and a typical bus full of children would require two adult monitors.

Pre-K children attending centers at elementary schools usually ride in the first two rows of newer buses, which have appropriate seats, but with that wouldn’t work for a bus full of small children. Denton said the district’s options include retrofitting existing buses, purchasing new buses and working with the city’s DATA bus service. The district could purchase DATA passes for parents for \$37 each month – with their children riding for free – and the parents would have to accompany their children to the bus stop in front of the Staff Development Center.

Despite board members’ concerns about costs, transportation and the location of the dedicated pre-K center, they were largely supportive of the idea.

“I love this,” said board member Leigh Bordley. “I regard this as a crucial reform.”

Laura Benson, executive director of Durham’s Partnership for Children, stressed that the agency is in strong support of the district’s proposal. “There’s great synergy and alignment, and we would only want to continue that,” she said.