

NC Pre-K: center of a political tug-of-war

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In a large classroom filled with books, toys and art supplies, teacher DeAnne Little sits on a couch with 4-year-old Barbara Hill reading the book, “Froggy’s Best Babysitter.”

The Durham classroom is illuminated with the color orange as the children’s artwork hangs on the wall and from the ceiling. Little said all of the artwork features the color of the month the help the children with number and letter recognition.



Barbara Hill reads with her teacher, DeAnne Little, at First Presbyterian Day School. (Staff photo by Jessica Seaman)

It is just after 9 a.m. and class has yet to start as children are still arriving, allowing Little to spend some one-on-one time with Barbara.

As Little reads aloud the story about a frog’s adventure in helping babysit his new sister, four-year-old Barbara excitedly points to pictures in the book as she tells her teacher what she already knows about the story.

Since starting class in August, Barbara’s vocabulary and writing skills have improved so much that her father, Shane Hill, is not worried about her starting kindergarten next year.

“She’s going to be well prepared for it,” he said. “She would be ready [if not in the class] but not as ready.”

Barbara did not attend another childcare program before she was accepted to the [NC Pre-K program](#). Hill said that he wanted Barbara to be a part of the program so that she wouldn’t be behind when she goes to elementary school.

Barbara is one of nine students who are part of the NC Pre-K program at First Presbyterian Day School.

NC Pre-K, formerly known as More at Four, is a pre-kindergarten program that is offered to four-year-old, at-risk children to help them transition to elementary schools without falling behind. According to the program, at-risk children come from low-income families or have a learning disability that would delay their learning.

This year NC Pre-K has been at the center of the political war between Democratic Gov. Bev Perdue and the Republican-dominated North Carolina General Assembly, ever since legislators slashed the programs funding by 20 percent in June and included a requirement that parents must pay up to 10 percent of their income to participate—something that critics have said threatens the ability to help children who need an educational boost beyond what their families can provide.

The latest in the fight for funding came after Wake County Superior Court Judge Howard Manning ordered the state to fund the program more.

A higher state court has also already ruled that a similar order amounts to a judicial interdiction that “infringes on the constitutional duties and expectations of the legislative and executive branches of government”—what the N.C. Supreme Court said in 2004 when it ruled on Manning’s previous order to establish a pre-K program .

Despite the higher rulings, Perdue has released a press release stating that she supports Manning’s order and recently issued a statement saying that she needs \$30 million to implement the first stage of Manning’s order to pay for adding 6,300 children to NC Pre-K, and that within four years, the state might need as much as \$300 million extra to comply with Manning’s order.

N.C. House Representative Hugh Blackwell, R-Burke, said that the program’s funding was cut in an effort to balance the state’s budget without raising taxes and that he does not know of any plans to reinstate any funding that was cut.

“There is a lot of politics going on,” he said. “My opinion is that Judge Manning and the Governor are making a difficult situation worse.”

Despite the slash in funding, the number of Pre-K slots in Durham County has not changed, said Melanie Busbee, spokesperson for [Durham Partnership for Children](#).

She said that the county is still able to offer 420 children spots in the program and that the funding cuts mainly affected administrative positions.

“That is very fortunate,” she said. “[The program] is still maintaining the high quality. We were able to still fund slots at about the same number of centers.”

Although, the funding cuts have not affected the number of students that are able to participate in the program, some Pre-K administrators say that the political tug-of-war between Republicans and Democrats concerning the funding harms the program.

“I think it has had an effect,” said Katharine Smith, executive director of First Presbyterian Day School in Durham.

“Here we take nine students and we were concerned because we had to hold slots,” she said.

Smith said she had to hold the slots, along with teaching positions, to determine how many spots the center would be able to offer after budget cuts were made.

“How do I hold a teacher while you determine funding?” she said. “And you can’t service all of the students that need funding.”

Barbara’s teacher, DeAnne Little, said the cuts have not affected how she teaches her class at the daycare.

“With class it hasn’t been too much change,” said Little. “I was nervous because we have kids that really need NC Pre-K.”

Little’s class consists of nine students who are part of the program and nine that are not in Pre-K.

At the beginning of the year there is a difference in the level of the students’ education and how well they can recognize numbers and letters, but by the end of the year the students are on an even level, she said.

Little said her own son, Daniel, was part of the program when he was 4 years old.

“As a teacher and a parent, I really was thankful he was able to get in,” she said. “I’m rooting for it all of the way.”

Busbee and Smith said that they are now waiting to hear if Judge Manning’s decision will affect them and if there will be future cuts to NC Pre-K.

“We’re trying to get a feel of what the next legislative ruling will be this spring,” Busbee said. “Future cuts will not affect the quality of education children get but the number of children that can be participate in the program.”