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Tuition a high price to pay for some cash-strapped families



[view slideshow \(5 images\)](#)

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DURHAM -- Adison Gurley ran up to Marcia Brooks holding several pieces of string tied together.

"Marcia, now see how long it is," the preschooler cried excitedly.

Brooks, the owner and director of the Lakewood Avenue Children's School, held up the string. It was not quite as tall as she was. "Oh, closer!" she told Adison. "Closer!"

Nearby, a boy in an orange T-shirt finished a jigsaw puzzle. One of the preschool teachers, Michelle Verrastro, gestured to a separate, disassembled puzzle. "Now pick a puzzle piece,

any puzzle piece," she said.

The boy, Marshall Miller, started fitting the parts together. When completed, like others in the series, it would use numbers, letters and pictures to represent a particular quantity.

Adison came back to Brooks. She had added another piece of string, but it had yet to match the director's height. "Almost!" Brooks told the girl, who darted away again to extend the line.

There were plenty of other activities for her to choose from in Lakewood's preschool classroom. Two boys were listening to a children's CD on headsets. A small group of children were working at the arts and crafts station. Others were playing with blocks, looking at books and practicing writing.

The 33 children aged 1 to 5 at Lakewood Avenue Children's School spend three hours a day outside, no matter the weather. The school boasts spacious play areas and gardens for all three classes -- toddlers, middlers and preschoolers. Teachers often lead youngsters on short walks to the fire station or the grocery store, where the children are prompted to identify shapes and colors.

But much of the day, both indoors and out, is given over to what Brooks calls child-centered play. That means the kids choose to do virtually anything in an "environment ... full of invitations and provocations" -- different amusements that help advance their development.

How it works

There are some limits on how many children can engage in an activity at any one time. Teachers are close by; the school has an 8:1 student-teacher ratio for preschoolers and ratios of 8:2 and 9:2 for toddlers and middlers. A full-time teacher works as a floater, filling in for colleagues who are sick, planning or studying; she also frequently joins a class even when both regular instructors are present.

The state Division of Child Development rates Lakewood Avenue five out of five stars. When the school was inspected on April 27, it earned the maximum score of 235 points.

The 23-year-old school has a well-educated, well-compensated and stable work force, and it charges fees to match its pedigree. Annual tuition this year ranged from \$16,440 for younger children to \$15,960 for 3- and 4-year-olds.

By comparison, UNC Chapel Hill says that its total 2010-11 bill for a college student from North Carolina will come to \$19,014, a figure that includes room, board, books, supplies, travel, health insurance and personal expenses. For Lakewood Avenue families, which include several Duke employees, lunch and snacks must be sent to school with the children, a cost on top of tuition.

Obviously, even if Lakewood Avenue would accommodate far more than its current 33 students, there would be many families that wouldn't be able to afford the school.

Those children who are fortunate enough to attend seem to be getting a great start. Lakewood Avenue wants its charges to absorb some ABCs, 123s and other fundamental facts and knowledge. But the school's major emphasis is actually helping the children to play with their peers -- and to do so without constant adult supervision.

When the children are ready to go to kindergarten, Brooks said, "they have social skills to

function as a part of a group, and I would say that's the most important thing."

Quality for all?

Angelica Oberleithner is an assistant director for Durham's Partnership for Children, a group that works with many of the local players in the early childhood education field.

"This is what all kids should have access to," Oberleithner said of Lakewood Avenue Children's School.

"You will have much better outcomes once they enter kindergarten. ... They are so ready to learn," Oberleithner added.

Durham County has a wide array of programs that are meant to make existing day-care centers more like Lakewood Avenue Children's School and to expand the number of child care openings. Some initiatives are targeted directly at parents, too. The concern of local leaders, however, is that there's still not enough help for the families that need it.

Much of the work of Durham's Partnership for Children and the Child Care Services Association involves helping family child-care homes and child-care centers maintain or improve their quality. The groups offer advice and consulting, help centers and homes find substitutes for teachers who enroll in training programs, and offer scholarships and pay supplements to make it easier and more appealing for instructors to improve their professional qualifications.

The association also runs a lunch program to ensure that children at select facilities are getting nutritious meals.

A group called Durham's Alliance for Child Care Access is a joint effort by the partnership, the association, the county Department of Social Services and Operation Breakthrough, which runs the local Head Start program. The alliance will help any parent who inquires find child care. The alliance also determines a child's eligibility for child-care subsidies (which use funds received by the county's social services agency), arranges transportation to child care and advises centers serving subsidized children. The alliance only refers families to facilities that have earned three or more stars on the state's five-star rating system.

Last year, the partnership found, about 57 percent of local children enrolled in child care were in places with four or five stars.

Working with DPS

There is also collaboration between these groups and Durham Public Schools in the form of a joint preschool application. The school system uses a combination of federal and state money to sponsor its preschool program. But the majority of local preschool slots sponsored by Head Start, a federal program, and More at Four, a North Carolina program, are at private child-care providers.

One initiative that the partnership, the school system and the PTA have been working on over the past year and a half is called Transition to Kindergarten. It involves elementary schools contacting and holding orientation sessions for families of 5-year-olds. Some schools reach out to local child-care providers to help give families a better idea of what to expect when their little ones enter kindergarten. And last month, the district also arranged a get-together for kindergarten and child-care instructors so the two groups could discuss how to address the different issues they face; additional teacher talks are planned.

The district has also put a variety of material to help parents prepare their children for school online at dpsnc.net/kindergarten.

As part of the collaboration, the school system has changed its assessment of incoming youngsters to conform with the five domains of early childhood -- physical development, social and emotional development, language development, cognitive development and learning habits and attitudes. The system is also looking into ways to make its kindergarten health assessment form more useful.

School officials plan to do more over the next year to ensure that pre-kindergarten teachers are doing a better job of preparing their charges for kindergarten. The district serves about 500 special-needs preschoolers and an additional 190 children without acute health or developmental issues who are eligible under state or federal guidelines.

The parent factor

The East Durham Children's Initiative has been working in North-East Central Durham to promote parenting classes. One of its key allies is the Durham County Cooperative Extension center. The extension's Welcome Baby project is about to expand its Incredible Years offerings to include classes for parents of infants and toddlers. (The classes, which launched locally in 2008, were initially tailored for parents of children aged 3 through 5.)

In a sense, it is this type of intervention -- potentially much simpler and cheaper than funding a preschool or child care slot -- that holds the most promise.

Denise Zavaleta took an Incredible Years course along with her husband, Antonio, this spring. She is a college-educated computer programmer who read assiduously on parenthood, but she said the course fundamentally changed the couple's approach to dealing with their 3-year-old twin boys.

Her description of that change seems to echo the philosophy at Lakewood Avenue Children's School.

"Everyone starts with discipline, but what the ... Incredible Years classes taught us how to do was actually to start with play," Zavaleta said. "So first teaching parents how to let the child direct the play, which gives them the confidence and gives that relationship some validity to the child. So you're building sort of a bond or a connection and thereby some trust and respect. And those things are harder to get by telling them and disciplining them."

Play time now involves the Zavaletas showing the boys "that what they're doing is interesting to me," often by talking about what they are doing as it happens instead of directing the action.

The class also emphasized ignoring bad behavior, when possible, so that children learn to earn attention by doing positive things. "How dramatic a change that could make in such a short amount of time," Zavaleta said. (She noted that it works on her husband as well as her offspring.)

Pat Harris, who runs Welcome Baby, believes that what the Zavaletas learned will help prepare their children for school. "We're talking about [children's] socialization, their ability to sort of sit in a classroom, to pay attention, to not need to act out to get attention," she said. "So it makes it a better learning environment for all the children, and the teacher can get further in terms of the material."

Costs and clients

At the other end of the spectrum from these parenting courses are a much more involved intervention: publicly funded child care and preschool.

Operation Breakthrough runs a federally funded Head Start program that serves 459 Durham preschoolers. The program cost \$3.6 million in 2008. By contrast, Welcome Baby has an annual budget of about \$500,000, much of it grant-funded, and reaches thousands of families a year through classes, hospital visits to new mothers, newsletter mailings, a parenting lending library, clothing giveaways and car seat safety initiatives.

The public school system and private providers cover another 612 children who are considered at-risk. That figure includes about 190 youngsters who attend public pre-K but does not count special-needs children. The school system could not provide exact figures, but its preschool budget is upwards of \$2 million a year for 700 pre-K slots plus various less-intense interventions for children with disabilities.

Durham's Partnership for Children has just expanded its programming thanks to a \$3 million Early Head Start grant. This 15-year-old federal initiative funds home visits and child care. As in the regular Head Start program, participating families receive special education, comprehensive social services, and assistance with dental, medical, mental health and nutritional problems. The new program will serve 120 Durham children, pregnant women and families.

"That's just a minuscule amount of what the real need is for Early Head Start, but we're really thrilled to be able to have those services," said Marsha Basloe, the head of Durham's Partnership for Children.

Even with the addition of Early Head Start, thousands of Durham families will still be unable to obtain quality child care for their young ones. There is no guarantee that will change, either.

Looking ahead

Still, Ellen Reckhow is hopeful. The Durham County commissioner knows that Eric Becoats, the Guilford County Schools administrator who will become Durham's superintendent Thursday, comes from a county with about 3,000 federally- and state-funded preschool slots -- about five times as many as Durham. Recently, Reckhow said, Becoats told her that he had heard of her interest in quality pre-kindergarten and shared it.

It's yet to be seen where that mutual enthusiasm might lead. Earlier this month, as the county and school system were nearing the end of a challenging 2010-11 budget adoption process, Reckhow said she did not foresee new county appropriations for early childhood education. Instead, she hopes that part of the existing Durham school budget can be redirected, and possibly combined with a private, state or federal grant to expand preschool services.

That hope may not be much for the county's unserved poor children to rely on. But if high-quality early childhood education is as powerful as advocates say, then that hope might represent a last best chance to prepare thousands of local youngsters for the rest of their lives.