

Pre-K looks a lot like what was

BY LYNN BONNER – News & Observer Staff writer – Thursday, August 25, 2011

Turbulence surrounds the state's pre-kindergarten program, which has been the subject of a court order, a potential legal appeal and barbs thrown between Republican legislative leaders and elected Democrats.

But for all the uncertainty about how pre-kindergarten should run, as school is about to open, the program looks a lot like a scaled down version of its old self - still with a long waiting list for admission.

Getting to this spot wasn't easy, because the rules are continuously changing. Wanda McCargo, owner of Wanda's Little Hands in Raleigh, said four of the 18 families who wanted to enroll their children in the pre-kindergarten program pulled out early on, when everyone thought parents would have to pay a fee.

"The parents were saying, 'Oh, I can't do that. I can't afford that,'" McCargo said.

Republican budget writers had wanted some parents to pay costs of up to 10 percent of their income. But as classes get under way, no fees are being charged as the state complies with a court ruling.

N.C. Pre-K, which until this year was called More at Four, is an academic program for at-risk 4-year-olds designed to prepare them for school.

The state has never had enough money to enroll all eligible children. The Durham Partnership for Children, which administers Pre-K, received 962 applications and plans to enroll 420 children.

In Wake County, 992 children are enrolled, and about 760 are on a waiting list.

Republican budget writers changed the program substantially this year by deciding to charge most parents a fee. They cut the program's budget by 20 percent and moved it from the state Department of Public Instruction to the Department of Health and Human Services.

Lawyers for poor counties in the long-running Leandro school quality lawsuit challenged cuts to education in this year's budget. Superior Court Judge Howard Manning, who oversees remedies under Leandro, ordered that the state cannot erect a barrier or implement a regulation that would prevent eligible at-risk students from enrolling.

The DHHS responded with a directive that no fees should be charged. Gov. Bev Perdue issued an executive order instructing state agencies to come up with a plan to serve all eligible children who apply. Republican leaders, who think Perdue is misinterpreting Manning's order, asked the judge for a clarification and got the Attorney General's Office to file notice of appeal.

None of this has kept the program from shrinking.

More at Four enrolled 30,767 children last year. The budget cut reduced slots in Pre-K to 27,248. Under the Manning order, the state doesn't get any money from fees, so now there's enough to cover 24,625 children, according to DHHS.

Until Manning clarifies his order, or the state comes out with a plan to admit more students, pre-kindergarten is holding steady.

"We'll wait and see what the judge rules," said Rep. Justin Burr, an Albemarle Republican. "We'll have a better idea what direction we need to move in."

Judge has no timetable

Manning relayed a message through court staff that there is no timetable for issuing a clarification.

Perdue, in her executive order, picked a direction and told DHHS to come up with a plan by October to serve all eligible at-risk students. Later, her office said there are limits to how many more students can be accommodated.

"As the Department of Health and Human Services continues implementing Judge Manning's order, it is important to recognize that there may be limitations to the program's ability to immediately serve every at-risk child that applies - those limitations include the availability of space and qualified staff," Perdue spokeswoman Chris Mackey said.

"Neither the Governor nor DHHS can flip a switch to ramp the program up overnight," Mackey said. Nevertheless, DHHS is developing a plan that will help identify and quantify the practical limitations so that they can be addressed in a reasonable and timely fashion."

What's ahead?

No one knows what will come next, but administrators are worried about the headache of charging new fees.

"It creates an administrative complexity that is daunting and puts a hardship on parents," said Laura Benson, executive director of the Durham Partnership for Children.

And if more children are admitted, not only the state but some local entity in each county will have to pay part of the bill because the state allocation doesn't cover the cost of each seat.

In Wake County, Smart Start fills the pre-kindergarten expense gap. Pam Dowdy, the office's executive director, said it doesn't have more money to devote to Pre-K

"If they don't fund the full cost of the program, we can't serve more children," she said.

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