

# Getting kids into Pre-K classes

Tuesday, January 17, 2012

The cow says “Moo.” The cash cow says “Ca-ching.”

Pre-kindergarten education is a growth industry, for all that its tools include crayons and juice boxes. There are thousands of children in North Carolina (650 in Durham) on the waiting lists for tax-subsidized seats in high-quality pre-school programs.

That “tax-subsidized” part is important. A year in Durham Academy’s pre-K program costs \$12,440. Tuition-paying students at the Chapel Hill-Carrboro Public Schools Pre-K program pay \$925 per month. The “market rate” for Durham’s pre-kindergarten classrooms is \$766 per month.

And the kids who need it most are the ones whose families are least able to afford it. Long-term studies, some of which emerged from Duke and UNC, have illustrated the radical difference that early childhood education has on academic achievement.

In November, Durham taxpayers voted in a quarter-cent sales tax that will, in part, expand pre-K services here.

The county has promised at least \$400,000 from those funds will go to early childhood education, and be administered by Durham’s Partnership for Children, which is the local NC Pre-K administrator.

Although many of the local pre-K providers are private, Durham Public Schools are also getting into the mix, adding seven classes this school year and another six in 2011-2012.

Last week, School Board Chairman Minnie Forte-Brown asked administrators to figure out how much it would cost to create a five-star pre-K center at DPS. Administrators had just estimated that the schools might pour between \$500,000 and \$750,000 into a facility without reaching the standards for licensure. To cover the renovation costs, the district might, like Chapel Hill-Carrboro, reserve a percentage of seats for students whose families could pay a fee, perhaps \$600 per month.

This is a tricky time of change for pre-kindergarten. Judge Howard Manning has ruled that the state must provide pre-kindergarten for at-risk children, which would seem to guarantee a stream of money to fund the public schools’ interesting new enterprise, but that decision was controversial and could be overturned on appeal.

If it is not, charter schools may also move in to tap this new revenue stream, and these brave new economics open the door for another round of lawsuits about whether taxpayers should fund construction for one type of school but not the other.

More classrooms are necessary and welcome, but DPS should go carefully.