

# **Sales-tax dollars would expand kindergarten-readiness program**

## ***\$400,000 would help Partnership touch all 2,800 rising kindergartners***

***Making the grade | The second in a four-part series***

By Melody Guyton Butts, mbutts@heraldsun.com; 419-6684

DURHAM – By age 5, nearly 90 percent of the brain’s architecture – skills for problem-solving, communication, critical thinking and teamwork – has already been developed. That’s why Laura Benson, executive director of Durham’s Partnership for Children, sees those first years, before many children walk into their first formal learning environment, as so important.

“Early education lays the groundwork for success in the public school system and certainly onto higher education,” she said. “That’s the premise on which we do our work for 25,000 children birth to 5 in Durham County.”

But of the 2,800 or so kindergartners expected to enter Durham Public Schools each year, Superintendent Eric Becoats says too many are unprepared, which is why the Partnership is looking to expand and enrich its Transition to Kindergarten program through its share the revenue that would be generated by a proposed quarter-cent sales tax now before voters.

If Durhamites approve of the measure – which appears as “Local Sales and Use Tax Referendum” on ballots – the projected \$9.2 million in annual revenue would be split into four pots: 67.12 percent to offset the expiration of federal funds in the DPS budget; 21.74 percent for debt service on DPS capital projects; 8.97 percent to support Durham Technical Community College scholarships; and 2.17 percent for the Partnership.

The 2.17 percent figure for Partnership funding suggests that \$200,000 would go to the Smart Start initiative, but county commissioners have promised a floor of \$400,000 in funding to offset a 20 percent state cut to the More at Four – the program now known as NC Pre-K – budget.

If the referendum passes, the county could begin collecting the quarter-cent tax on April 1, 2012, meaning that the first three months – until the start of fiscal year 2012-13 – of revenue would have no set use. Commissioners have pledged to give those funds to the Partnership. After the first year, the additional funds needed to bring Partnership funding up to \$400,000 would come from an expected increase in sales tax revenue.

It was important for the county to look at education broadly when considering the referendum, county commission Vice Chairwoman Ellen Reckhow said, starting with the youngest minds shaped by the Partnership’s work and going all the way to the adults who need retraining at Durham Tech.

“Most studies show the importance of pre-K in helping to get a child ready to learn,” she said. “The idea is for us to help expand the investment in pre-K services so that more of our at-risk children get this

early boost, because it is so important.”

The Transition to Kindergarten program, which the Partnership runs in partnership with DPS kindergarten specialists, aims to make the passage into kindergarten as smooth and positive an experience as possible. The program’s strategies include: pre-K learning opportunities to increase school readiness; efforts to foster collaboration among family members, pre-K personnel and kindergarten teachers; and assessments of incoming kindergarteners.

The \$400,000 in annual funding would “allow us to serve more children in a more thorough-going and sustainable way so that we could address more layers of Transition to Kindergarten,” Benson explained.

Services could be enhanced with additional funds, she said, by coordinating connections between pre-K and kindergarten teachers throughout the whole school system and by offering parents more information and open houses leading up to the kindergarten transition.

“One of the key factors of not only children’s academic success, but also the strengths as a whole education system, is parent involvement,” Benson said. “If we engage parents in a whole variety of ways – much more than what our capacity is now – we could set the groundwork for enhanced family support and parent involvement. The research points to that being a critical factor in children’s success.”

The Partnership’s goal is to serve, in some way, every one of the 2,800 children entering kindergarten in Durham County each year.

“The increased funding would allow us to think much more deeply and much more creatively about the kinds of things we can do as a community to reach all of those children, including children who are not currently in an early-learning environment,” Benson said.

It’s important to address children’s developmental, social-emotional and physical and mental health needs early on, she said.

The move to kindergarten is “the first major milestone of transition from the time where children are predominantly in their parents’ care or in an early-education setting, into a more formal early elementary education plan,” Benson said. “Handling that transition well sets the groundwork for all the domains of learning so that children have a positive response and an eagerness and a familiarity with the formal school setting so that their approach to learning is set positively.”

Read more: [The Herald-Sun - Sales tax dollars would expand kindergarten readiness program](#)