

STANDING UP FOR STUDENTS

NYSUT's grass-roots advocates converge at a critical time in Albany *pages 3-4*



New York Teacher

NYSUT REPRESENTS MORE THAN 575,000 PROFESSIONALS IN EDUCATION AND HEALTH CARE

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The pre-K advantage

Why it benefits kids — especially those in poverty

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Greece preschoolers

Julie Healy with pre-K students in Vernon



The little local that could

Thousand Islands EA uses survey to tailor success

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Delay expected for new math Regents

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Discovering the benefits of



Fadiah Tobler-Morris gets a close-up look at the camera in her pre-K class in Greece.



Walk into Lisa Baxter's pre-kindergarten classroom in Oneida County and you might find students cleaning a cola-stained egg with a toothbrush for a unit on dental health. In Julie Healy's class, students are eating pizza — the culmination of a week all about the letter "P."

For Healy, Baxter and other early education teachers across the state, the pre-kindergarten classroom is about taking advantage of every teachable moment. For the curious 3- and 4-year-olds, it's about fun.

"We try to develop awareness and readiness for school with exposure to everything we can: counting, colors, patterning, a focus on math and science skills," said Healy, president of the Vernon-Verona-Sherrill Teachers Association, and a universal pre-K teacher at the W.A. Wetzel School in Vernon.

With kids asked to do and know more at an even younger age, more emphasis is being placed on the littlest learners. After years of flat funding, the statewide universal pre-K program is finally poised to get a major influx of funds — in his inaugural budget proposal in January, Gov. Spitzer earmarked an additional \$99 million for the 10-year-old program. Legislative leaders are negotiating funding for the program as the state aims for an April 1 on-time budget.

"Universal pre-K and full-day kindergarten ensure that children receive a healthy start, especially in high-need districts," said NYSUT President Dick Iannuzzi. "Such a commitment to early education would be a solid long-term investment in our children's future."

Independent learners

Lisa Baxter hopes to instill lifelong learning habits in her classes of pre-kindergartners at Longridge Elementary School in the Rochester suburb of Greece.

"As they get older and are in other grades, if they take the initiative to explore and learn things, they are going to get so much more out of the education experience," Baxter said.

Though there are short periods of structured group activity, a majority of the class time is spent on independent learning.

During a unit on dental health, for example, Baxter's students could choose to play at a number of learning centers throughout the classroom. At the art center, students could make their own "Tommy the Tooth" puppet or use a toothbrush to paint; the dramatic play center was set up as a dentist's office with students bringing in baby dolls for checkups.

At the listening center they could browse through books like *Moose's Loose Tooth*. Baxter introduced math skills by having students draw a mouth and using up to 10 marshmallows as the teeth.

"It's choice-based. They're taking a lot of initiative in their own learning," said Baxter, a member of the Greece TA, led by Don Pallozzi. Students can participate in any center and do the presented activities or make up one of their own. "If they learn to explore and investigate on their own, it's much more meaningful."

At the English Village school, also in Greece, pre-K teacher Sue-Ellen Stacey takes a similar approach to independent learning. "Our focus is on making them more ready for school, making them good problem solvers so when they do begin kindergarten they are more confident in their abilities," Stacey said. "The standards and expectations in kindergarten have changed, and I think it's very important for kids to have this experience."

Another important skill preschoolers learn is expected school behavior.

At the Wetzel school in Verona, Healy works with preschoolers on letter recognition as well as the basic school skills of lining up, raising hands, sitting still for story time and taking

turns. "Socialization is a huge part of the program," she said.

NYSUT supports a comprehensive program to encourage cross-the-board gains in learning.

"We support quality pre-kindergarten programs as one of the research-based efforts in closing the achievement gap," NYSUT Vice President Maria Neira said. "Study after study has shown children who participate in quality pre-K and full-day kindergarten programs experience long term benefits in and out of the classroom."

The state Legislature established the universal pre-K program in 1997 with a goal of providing all 4-year-olds the opportunity to benefit from an early education experience.

The voluntary program was to be phased in over four years, with funding expected to increase from \$67 million in the 1998-99 school year to \$500 million in 2001-02.

All of the state's more than 700 school districts were supposed to be phased in by 2001-02. However, funding never reached expected levels and according to State Education Department figures for the 2004-05 school year, only 192 of the 244 eligible districts participated in the preschool programs, which served more than 57,000 students.

"NYSUT and the state Board of Regents have been advocating for universal pre-K for years, and we applaud the governor for his effort to begin expanding the program again," said NYSUT Executive Vice President Alan Lubin. "The Legislature has indicated support for this proposal, which would open the program to all districts by 2010-11 with \$650 million in funding."

NYSUT's preference is a quality preschool program in a public school setting. But with many districts opting not to take part for lack of space or funds, more than half of all preschool programs are in non-school-based

PRE-K

▶ Julie Healy teaches her pre-K class about fossils at W.A. Wetzel School in Vernon.

▶ Greece teacher Jennifer Warren and Brenna Cleary.



NANCY L. FORD

community settings.

NYSUT is concerned, Neira said, that non-school-based programs are not always taught by a highly qualified certified teacher and curriculum does not always align with the school district curriculum. Union leaders will work with SED to set standards for pre-K programs to correct this problem.

State Ed figures show that in the 2004-05 school year, 62 percent of universal pre-K students were served outside of public schools. And of an SED-estimated 250,000 four-year-olds statewide, only 48 percent participated in a pre-kindergarten program.

“A child coming in without pre-K is really starting out behind.”

—Sandra Wilks-Duplan
United Federation of Teachers

Attending a public program at PS 223 in Queens made all the difference for the son of Sandra Wilks-Duplan, an elementary teacher and chapter leader for the United Federation of Teachers, NYSUT’s affiliate in New York City schools. “He went to nursery school but because he had certified teachers, they were able to use the skills he learned and strengthen them,” she said. “A child coming in without pre-K is really starting out behind.”

Besides access to certified teachers, school settings offer other benefits, educators say. At Greece’s Longridge Elementary, Baxter often invites guests and second-grade buddies in to read to her students.

In Verona, Healy has access to the school’s speech and occupational therapists, who provide some early intervention when needed. Children also get a daily taste of such offerings as physical education, art, music and library.

Stretching the funds

The Vernon-Verona-Sherrill district has offered universal pre-K for as long as state funding has been in place. With the state grant stretching only so far, the district helps cover program costs in its annual budget.

In addition to the salaries for the teachers and aides (by law the maximum class size is 18 students with one teacher and one aide per class), other costs include classroom space, materials, class supplies and transportation.

With this latest influx of funds, many more districts may have an opportunity to create strong preschool programs, Neira said.

The need for more pre-K is evident in the many districts with annual waiting lists for the few available slots. New York City’s shortage has been the focus of news reports showing parents sleeping outside of schools to get their kids into preschool programs.

“Research has show that early education programs work and are an effective way of helping to close the achievement gap,” Neira said. “With this additional funding, we should be able to serve even more students.”

— Clarisse Butler Banks



JIM LARAGY

Greece preschoolers Leah Patterson and Jason Phelps spend time at the computer center.

What experts say

Learning through play and socialization may be fun for preschoolers, but research shows the four-year-olds are getting major benefits from early education.

- Winning Beginning New York compiled several statistics on pre-K.
 - Children in pre-K are 50 percent less likely to need special education services than children who had no preschool.
 - Every dollar invested in preschool programs returns \$7 in savings for remediation, welfare payments, unemployment and other compensatory costs.
- A National Institute of Early Education Research study found participation in pre-K programs results in significantly positive effects on achievement scores beyond grade 3. Also:
 - 20 percent lower rates of special education retention.
 - 15 percent lower rates in grade repetition.
 - Pre-K for disadvantaged children can increase their cognitive abilities, leading to longterm increases in achievement and school success.
- The Rochester Early Childhood Assessment Partnership found 83 percent of participating students exceeded targeted academic skills and social engagement.
- Studies by the Clive Belfield Teachers College, Perry Preschool Study, the Chicago Child Parent Center and others have shown significant long-term cost savings to schools and government. Benefits include lower crime rates, reduced need for remedial services, lower dropout rates and higher income in employment.