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BACK TO SCHOOL

An early start to education

Expanding preschool seen as giving kids a boost

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A coalition of leaders in education and public health are working to increase access and awareness around early childhood education in Petaluma, particularly for lower-income families that might struggle to afford the cost of preschool or other similar programs.

Among those efforts is an expansion of funding for Value in Preschool, a scholarship program funded by First 5 Sonoma County for lower-income families that might earn too much for state assistance, as well as plans for a new North Bay Children's Center-run preschool at the Valley Vista Elementary School campus to open later this year.

At stake is the increasingly mainstream belief among educators and others that early childhood education programs lead to significantly better long-term outcomes for students into adulthood. Yet economic and social headwinds remain, with at least 25 percent of students entering kindergarten in Petaluma's largest district with no early education experience at all, said Jane Escobedo, deputy superintendent overseeing educational services for Petaluma City Schools.

Through outreach, new programs and funding, advocates are seeking to shrink that number.

"Preschool is a game changer for our students, and we believe every student deserves the opportunity to participate," Escobedo said.

The Petaluma-Penngrove area had an estimated 2,500 children between the ages of 2 and 5 in 2015, according to the Sonoma County Office of Education. Capacity across all of the city's preschool and childcare facilities was measured at 105 percent of that need, meaning that every family — assuming they could afford it — would be able to find a spot for their child.

Limited space

Yet room is limited for the 25.7 percent of area families that qualify for the limited number of state-subsidized spaces, which require that a family of four make no more than \$52,959 — less than 70 percent of state median income — according to the county education office. Only 56 percent of that demand can be met with existing spaces, a 182-slot gap.

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According to the report, nearly 16.5 percent of the target population in the Petaluma- Penngrove area are from families that make between \$50,000 and \$75,000 — too much for state subsidies, yet considered by advocates to be too little to comfortably afford annual preschool costs of around \$10,000.

“That’s a mortgage payment,” said Ramona Faith, CEO of the Petaluma Health Care District, who has been lobbying for awareness around early childhood education.

To help bridge that gap, First 5 Sonoma County, the local chapter to the state’s early childhood-focused program, increased funding for its Value in Preschool scholarship program in its current fiscal year, said Alfredo Perez, executive director. The move followed a decision to raise the income ceiling for eligible families, which allowed those making as much as 80 percent of median income to apply.

Expansion with grants

The program, which awards up to \$10,000 annually, had formerly tracked the state’s income guidelines. The requirements were tweaked following increasing concern that families in need across Sonoma County were still unable to qualify for state assistance, something Perez said was particularly acute in Petaluma.

“We originally structured the guidelines around the state income requirement. But we soon realized that was part of the problem,” he said.

First 5 this year awarded a \$1.58 million grant to Community Child Care Council of Sonoma County, the nonprofit that administers Value in Preschool, allowing it to expand to Petaluma and the Rohnert Park-Cotati area, with 80 slots available countywide over four years.

Low-income subsidies

Seven schools in Petaluma have signed on as providers in the Value in Preschool program, according to the Community Child Care Council, better known as 4Cs.

“The program allows us to provide a subsidized program as well,” said Jenny Copeland, site supervisor at the Cherry Valley preschool, which now accepts students through the program.

Four preschools in Petaluma are authorized to serve students whose families qualify for the California State Preschool Program, which offers support on a sliding scale up to the full cost of enrollment, according to 4Cs. That’s in addition to the city’s federally supported Head Start preschool at Mckinley Elementary School, which serves very low-income residents.

Elementary transition

Capacity in Petaluma is set to increase by 24 slots this October, when North Bay Children’s Center is expected to complete construction of a new preschool located at Valley Vista Elementary School, said the organization’s executive director, Susan Gilmore. The facility will serve low-income families in the area, and help students transition to the adjacent elementary school.

“This is a fairly innovative model,” she said. “Not every preschool has to be on a school campus. But it’s an added benefit.”

Gary Callahan, superintendent of Petaluma City Schools, agreed.

“The transition from preschool to kindergarten is really quite seamless when they’re located at the same school site,” he said. Other preschools located at school sites in the district include both 4Cs and Children’s Center-run facilities at McDowell Elementary, as well as a cooperative preschool at McKinley.

Unfilled slots

Callahan cited such arrangements as an example of the district’s support of early childhood education programs, which have shown to pay off well beyond the transition to kindergarten.

“Study after study has shown how preschool helps students to be college or career- ready,” he said.

While other cities in Sonoma County have long waiting lists for state-supported programs, Jenny Juhl, a 4Cs spokeswoman, noted that her organization and others often struggle to find students for slots in Petaluma. Advocates say the reasons are complex, but could include incomes that are generally higher than elsewhere in the county and a need for further outreach to the Spanish- speaking community.

“I can’t say it enough, we are actively searching for students in Petaluma,” said Juhl, who noted that the two 4Cs preschools in the city had 34 available state-supported slots as of early this week. “They either don’t know about these services or don’t qualify. Either way, it’s a problem.”

Countywide efforts

Sonoma County as a whole lost 600 state-subsidized preschool spaces during a period of state budget tightening between 2009 and 2013, according to a recent report to the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors.

California did take a step to beef up early childhood education with the creation of transitional kindergarten in 2010, which puts younger students formerly eligible for kindergarten into a pre-kindergarten preparation curriculum. Yet the approach is still seen as a bridge between preschool and the K-12 curriculum, and an across-the-board preschool mandate does not exist.

Still, there is widespread support for early childhood education among the county’s political leaders. The Board of Supervisors approved a \$305,000 general fund expenditure to preserve 312 subsidized slots at risk of closing countywide in May, along with a direction for First 5 to devote \$350,000 to the effort. First 5 also announced this month that it had awarded a total of nearly \$11 million to 12 Sonoma County groups focused on services, like preschool and childcare, to residents up to five years old.

Uncertain future

Yet the future for First 5’s efforts is uncertain, as the organization is supported by declining revenue from a state tobacco tax. Perez, the executive director, estimated that the organization would be forced to significantly reduce its funding to programs by 2020, and is currently focusing on long-lasting efforts.

In lobbying for support around finding new funding, as well as raising interest and awareness around preschool, the Petaluma Health Care District cites a seven-dollar return for every dollar spent on early education. Other benefits include a 29 percent increase in high school graduation rates, a 50 percent

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decrease in the likelihood of needing special education, a 70 percent decrease in the chance of a violent crime arrest and an 80 percent greater likelihood of attending college.

“The research is telling us that kids who enter kindergarten ready to succeed are more likely to be able to read at third grade, graduate high school, go to college, get a job, get access to health care, stay out of jail,” Faith said. “We’re already spending the money. We’re just spending it at the other end.”



Teacher Shannon Wilson works with children at the North Bay Children’s Center preschool Cherry Valley campus in Petaluma. The school participates in the Value in Preschool program, which provides subsidized preschool for low-income families through the Community Child Care Council.

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Mary Collins School at Cherry Valley Librarian April Derby reads to the children and teacher Karen Nau of the North Bay Children’s Center preschool at Cherry Valley campus in Petaluma on Tuesday, Aug. 18.

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