

READING BY NINE 

New approach: Learn, don't just play, in preschool



AMY E. CONN FOR THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Innovative. Sonique Levels, 4, plays with a word-and-number puzzle at the Margaret H. Cone Head Start Center in Dallas.

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DALLAS — In Frazier Courts, behind torn screen doors, children grow up without fathers and with mothers who are young, uneducated and out of work.

A sprawling public-housing project on Dallas' impoverished south side, Frazier Courts is a collection of bleak, barracklike buildings and sparse yards landscaped only with metal clotheslines. It looks like the sort of place that would breed school failure.

Yet President Bush thinks this place can help teach America's children how to read.

Tucked behind the worn buildings is a Head Start center with a literacy curriculum that gives kids an academic jump-start.

Rather than focus on boosting a youngster's health and development — the traditional bedrock of federally funded Head Start — this center teaches very young children the building blocks of reading.

Julia C. Frazier Elementary, the school in heart of the housing project, has reaped the benefits.

Once plagued by low test scores, Frazier Elementary has earned two "exemplary" ratings in a row from the Texas Education Agency. It's an accomplishment made possible because 80 percent or more of Head Start graduates now pass Texas' third-grade reading test.

"It was the best thing we could have done," said Shirley Newhouse, a teacher at the Head Start center.

Bush now wants all the Head Start centers — serving almost 900,000 3- and 4-year-olds from low-income families across the country — to adopt programs similar to the one in Dallas, and for all states to do the same with any preschool programs under their control.

In Florida, where voters last month approved free preschool for all 4-year-olds, the president's brother, Gov. Jeb Bush, also wants a focus on literacy development.

The Bush brothers are part of a growing chorus of politicians and educators clamoring for improved early-childhood education. A cornerstone of

both federal and Florida education-reform efforts is getting all children reading by age 9.

Many now realize that reaching that goal means paying attention to what happens when children are 3 and 4, critical years for developing the foundations of reading. Besides, it's far easier to help preschoolers than elementary-age kids, experts say.

Critics: Let kids be kids

Despite near-universal agreement that the early years are key, not everyone likes the recent tone of preschool-education talk.

Many people doubt there's money to pay for it, and some worry that the push for standards and testing now in vogue in K-12 education will be forced onto young kids, with harmful results.

That worry was on display in September, at the Early Childhood Association of Florida's conference in Orlando. T-shirts for sale read: "Preschool is not boot camp for kindergarten."

Young children need time to play, explore and learn new social skills, said Suzanne Gellens, the executive director of the association, which represents about 2,580 child-care workers.

"Legislators are pushing academics down. We feel that's not necessarily in the best interest of the child," Gellens said. "I think a lot of us are very concerned that they're going to be imposing a kindergarten curriculum on preschoolers."

But President Bush and many reading experts say they don't want youngsters doing worksheets at desks or taking make-or-break tests, though the president has told Head Start to develop a system to assess "learning in early literacy." They mostly want poor kids to acquire the skills they need so

they can learn to read once in elementary school.

Those skills are a good vocabulary, a familiarity with books and ABCs and the ability to hear the sounds of English — to know that "sun" and "fun" rhyme, for example, and that "ball" and "bat" start with the same sound.

Children who master those skills by age 5 typically learn to read without much trouble. Those who don't, struggle to decipher written words.

Struggle starts early

Kids from middle- and upper-class families often pick up this groundwork at home, starting in infancy, by sharing books and conversations with their parents.

Poor kids typically do not. Many of these children are raised by uneducated parents or by parents who are poor readers. Many of these parents don't — or can't — read to their kids and don't engage them in challenging conversations.

Once they start elementary school, poor kids usually struggle the most. In Florida, more than half the students in public elementaries live in poverty. More than 40 percent have trouble reading.

For these kids, quality preschool can make a critical difference. Yet America's poorest children are the least likely to attend preschool and, if they do, often end up in places that do little to foster literacy.

"If it's not being taught directly, they won't learn it by osmosis," said Marcia Invernizzi, an education professor at the University of Virginia. "That's the major thing: It's all about preschool."

Officials with Head Start of Greater Dallas, which runs the Margaret H. Cone Head Start Center in Frazier Courts, learned that the hard way.

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The center opened in 1990, a collaboration between the Head Start agency and the private Texas Instruments Foundation, which wanted to improve the lot of a poor, mostly black neighborhood.

The foundation helped build the center and paid for two social workers and a nurse practitioner to join the staff. The assumption was that those extras would boost youngsters' readiness for school.

They didn't.

Children who attended the Cone center those first years were behind when they enrolled and ended the year even further behind. When they got to kindergarten, their scores were as low as the 21st percentile on standardized tests.

Nell Carvell, a reading expert with Southern Methodist University, was contacted to write a new curriculum for the Dallas center. She knew that without help, these children were doomed to struggle in school, perhaps enough to be shunted off to special-education classes.

"I didn't believe they had learning disabilities," Carvell said. "It was environmental disabilities."

At home, she said, they were "parked in front of the television." At Head Start, they were given few opportunities to learn about print or expand their vocabularies.

'Play with a purpose'

The new curriculum put books and language center stage.

As part of monthly themes, teachers read stories, teach letters and their sounds and encourage students to talk. They do what middle-class parents do "almost instinctively," Carvell said. They explain while reading a storybook, for example, that snowman starts with an "S" or point out a character's blue shirt. They encourage the kids to describe what they see and to explain what they think might happen.

Everything is meant to be fun and kid-friendly, so there's lots of singing, clapping and games. Finger painting, puzzles and blocks remain a part of the day. But most everything is geared to boosting those pre-reading skills.

"It's play, but play with a purpose," Carvell said.

Amy Tarver is glad she enrolled her 3-year-old son and will do the same for her 1-year-old — if her run-down Frazier Courts apartment isn't demolished by then, as the city has proposed.

"He's learning a lot," Tarver said. "He's learning his alphabet. He's learning his coloring. He's learning his numbers."

The curriculum, dubbed LEAP for Language Enrichment Activities Program, is now in place in all the Dallas Head Start centers. Thanks to the president and first lady Laura Bush, who visited the Cone Head Start Center when her husband was Texas governor, the program has been expanded to other preschools in Texas as well as to other states. When Bush announced his early-childhood initiative in April, he touted it again.

Pictra Payne teaches in a Dallas Head Start center that serves children of Mexican immigrants. On a recent morning, she pulled out sheets of laminated paper decorated with signs from fast-food restaurants.

"Who remembers what sign this is?" Payne asked the students seated around her on the floor. "Who remembers what letter this is? Who remembers what sound that letter makes?"

Most of the children called out "McDonald's, M, mmm" when they saw the picture of the arches.

Lilianna Gonzalez, 4, crawled to the front of the circle, eager to name all the letters in the Wendy's sign. "And 'S,'" she said, smiling as she finished.

These sorts of activities were a big change for the Dallas Head Start teachers when LEAP was introduced in 1993 and required lots of training.

Newhouse, who has taught at Cone since it opened, worried initially that the new lessons would stress her students and that she wouldn't implement them correctly. She soon found her 3- and 4-year-old students loved the changes, and she loved the results.

"Young children can learn. It's how it's presented," Newhouse said. "It's been fantastic."

Noticeable difference

Just blocks away, the staff at Frazier Elementary agrees.

Cone center graduates now arrive ready to start learning to read, scoring well above the national average — two years ago as high as the 94th percentile — on standardized tests in kindergarten.

"We can definitely tell the kids who've been there," said kindergarten teacher Emily Jenkins.

The school — where 40 of 41 third-graders passed the state reading test this year — deserves plenty of credit for its successes. But staff members said the Cone center makes their jobs far easier.

"If they go to the Cone center, it's like they get three years of kindergarten," Jenkins said. "If they haven't been anywhere . . ." she said, her voice trailing off as she shook her head. "We can try to catch them up, but it's a lot of work."

Although numerous studies document the benefits of quality preschool, providing it isn't cheap.

Because of money shortages, Head Start now only serves about 60 percent of the eligible children nationwide. President Bush infuriated the National Head Start Association by pushing for increased literacy programs this year while proposing a budget that would mean fewer children could be served next year.

"If you want us to do more, we think that's wonderful," said Sarah Greene, the association's president. "You can't do it on the cheap."

Florida's hurdles

The same argument has been made about the Florida Partnership for School Readiness, the state agency charged with getting poor children ready for school. The taxpayer-funded partnership has long waiting lists and spends, on average, less per child than either Head Start or reputable private child-care centers.

Critics complain that the partnership favors cheaper day care and family care over more-expensive but more-academic public-school programs. Those options, critics say, don't do much to improve literacy skills.

All of these issues will be revived in the coming months as Gov. Bush and the Florida Leg-

islature grapple with how to implement the prekindergarten measure.

The amendment to the state constitution requires Florida to provide free, "high-quality" pre-K classes to all 4-year-olds whose parents want them to attend — yet provides no details on what should be taught or who should teach it.

Even before the president made his pitch in April for improved early literacy instruction, some local preschools had started that shift.

Head Start of Orange County, for example, which serves more than 1,550 children, beefed up its literacy activities a few years ago. Recently, it hired a literacy coordinator.

The prekindergarten classes the Seminole County school district runs have made a similar turn.

At Pine Crest Elementary in Sanford, teacher Ann Silvius still helps her students — all from low-income families — learn to sit quietly and pay attention. But now, she quickly moves on to preparing them to read, maintaining a "fine balance" to make the academics appropriate for 4-year-olds.

Melina LaFlore's four older children went to Head Start centers in Ohio before the family moved to Central Florida. Those programs seemed more like day-care centers, she said. She thinks her 4-year-old daughter, Aryn, will benefit from Pine Crest's greater focus on academics.

"I think it helps them get ready for school," she said.

That's true, said Susan Landry, director of the Center for Improving the Readiness of Children for Learning and Education at the University of Texas, which was tapped to provide new literacy training to Head Start teachers.

"If we pay more attention to preschool literacy, other problems would decrease," she said.

Preschools that serve poor children and mostly let them play do them, and society, a "huge disservice," Landry said.

"They're like sponges," she added. "I think we've learned that they can learn more."

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