Early childhood education system is costly, challenging for families and providers

By Dale Mezzacappa

Early childhood education in Philadelphia — and throughout the state and country — is a hodgepodge of public and private options that is very difficult for families to navigate.

It is marked by a confusing patchwork of funding and a licensing system that emphasizes compliance rather than quality — not to mention that expenses for families are dizzyingly high even though most workers in the field, virtually all women, barely make enough to live on.

While the issue of affordable child care is getting attention in the presidential race (thanks to Elizabeth Warren), it deserves more due to its impact on nearly every American family.

In terms of understanding the importance of early learning and the ultimate benefits of high-quality child care on the economy, the U.S. is not only at the bottom of developed countries, “but worse than some developing countries,” said Ann O’Brien, director of Wonderspring, a major early childhood provider in Philadelphia and Montgomery County.

Wonderspring, formerly Montgomery Early Learning Center (MELC), has 10 sites that serve 700 to 800 children every day, including centers in West and Southwest Philadelphia.

Some of the sites serve infants through school age from “a wide range of socioeconomic families,” said O’Brien. By contrast, many centers are largely segregated by race and income, because they are drawing from the neighborhoods in which they are located. Like all providers, Wonderspring must negotiate a array of funding streams and subsidy programs in order to make ends meet.

There are federal grants through Head Start and Early Head Start, the state Pre-K Counts program, PHLpreK in the city, as well as state child care subsidies. Eligibility criteria for families also vary depending on the program; Head Start families must be at or below 100% of the federal poverty level, while Pre-K Counts goes up to three times that amount. PHLpreK has no income limit, but it contracts with providers mostly in underserved and low-income neighborhoods.

“The streams of revenue are so fractured, they are very difficult to manage,” O’Brien said. And the total amount of government support is not enough. Plus, it is funneled through an intermediary, most commonly the local school district.

Having private paying families as well as low-income ones is what keeps Wonderspring fiscally solvent, O’Brien said, but other centers aren’t in that position.

Programs also have different requirements for caregivers. In Pre-K Counts, teachers must be certified, but not in PHLpreK, where only an associate’s degree is necessary. Centers taking Pre-K Counts money
Presidential elections, PA governor finally focus on importance of early education

Academic studies that demonstrate the benefits of high quality early childhood education — on health, academic outcomes, crime reduction, and economic growth — have been around for decades. Yet, as a nation, we have been reluctant to act on this information.

And not just pre-K, but quality care from infancy to age three — the most crucial stage of brain growth and development — has been repeatedly shown to pay off in a child’s later years.

But for all the political “pro-family” talk, the U.S. is massively behind other developed countries, and some developing countries as well, in how we offer support to parents with young children.

Finally, the issue is getting some top-tier attention in the presidential race. Not surprisingly, Elizabeth Warren, a former teacher and working mom, was the pioneer here. In 2019, she proposed a program under which good care would be available, paid for by a wealth tax, and no family would spend more than 7% of its income to access it. Bernie Sanders recently came up with a program that would be free to all, also paid for by taxes on the super-wealthy.

And while his plan is much more limited, Joe Biden is now talking about free pre-K for all. In his jubilant Super Tuesday speech, he brought it up right after saying he would rejoin the Paris Climate Accord, promising “full-time school for three, four and five years old, and increasing exponentially the prospects of their success.” Even President Trump recognizes the political upside of plowing more federal money into affordable, quality child care and pre-kindergarten.

What exists now, in Philadelphia and elsewhere, is a public-private mash-up that, not surprisingly, lags most in delivering high-quality care to the neediest areas. Policy-wise, Pennsylvania is way behind; the mandatory starting age for school was reduced to age six from age eight only starting this year (except in Philadelphia, where it has been six for several years). And that was not an easy lift.

But most kindergarten students are five, and with this change kindergarten is still discretionary. And Pennsylvania (along with New Jersey) is one of only eight states that don’t require any kindergarten.

In February, Wolf announced that he wants to change this by making full-day kindergarten mandatory for every district in the state, but that is also a heavy lift. Districts already fret that the state aid to education has not kept up with new mandates or ever-accelerating fixed costs like charter reimbursements and pension obligations. Wolf proposes to pay for the kindergarten initiative by overhauling the charter funding system, but that will be politically dicey with the Republican legislature.

Of the state’s 500 districts, 428 offer full-day programs. Those that don’t — including some of the most affluent, like Lower Merion and Council Rock — cite cost and lack of space as deterrents.

Philadelphia has had full-day kindergarten since the 1990s, when former Superintendent David Hornbeck made it a do-or-die issue. Clearly, this has reaped benefits for families regarding cost and convenience. A 2002 study that tracked Philadelphia students from kindergarten into fourth grade demonstrated that students enrolled in full-day kindergarten received higher report card grades and better reading, math, and science scores on standardized tests in third grade than students in half-day kindergarten classrooms.

While the benefits of high-quality preschool and kindergarten have been documented, the gains must be reinforced in later grades. In Philadelphia, quality in K-12 has always been buffeted by the funding roller coaster that has made it harder for individual schools to maintain stability, especially in the city’s lowest income neighborhoods. And even with the contractually mandated class size limits, the maximum of 30 students is still too large. Even as the District’s investment in modernized classrooms has thrilled kindergarten teachers, one veteran noted that her principal’s decision to budget for an extra kindergarten teacher, which lowered class sizes to 20, had the biggest payoff in her classroom.

While curricular focus — the perennial battle over balancing play with more structured focus on letters and words — is also important, once again the issue boils down to resources. The mix of public-private options is here to stay, but government policy must step up.

According to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), more children are enrolled in state-funded pre-K programs across the U.S. than two decades prior, but state funding failed to keep pace. This is no surprise, but it is counterproductive. Little has been done to raise the salaries of child care workers and early childhood educators, who are nearly always women, despite their crucial role in assuring the futures of both individuals and society. NIEER’s State of Preschool 2018 annual report found that just a third of 4-year-olds and 5.5% of 3-year-olds were enrolled in public preschools, and showed that the upward trend had stalled out several years before. Plus, the report found, state spending per child has decreased when adjusted for inflation.

This is why the interest of the presidential candidates in early childhood education and child care is heartening. Let’s hope that regardless who becomes our next president, they follow through with beneficial policies and resources, and that states — especially Pennsylvania — follow suit.
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We must fix Philadelphia’s broken early intervention system

By Margie Wakelin

When 3-year-old Joe went to live with his foster mother last fall, she immediately enrolled him in a nearby preschool. Shortly after he started, his teachers reported that Joe had trouble keeping his hands to himself. Although this sounded like typical behavior for a toddler, his foster mother quickly signed paperwork for Elwyn, Philadelphia’s preschool special education provider, to complete an evaluation.

Weeks later, as reports of Joe’s behavior escalated, Elwyn completed the evaluation, concluding that he had a behavior-related disability. They created a special education plan, and Joe’s foster mother thought he would finally get help.

However, Joe’s services were slow to start. Elwyn reported that it needed to collect at least six weeks of data before providing an aide for Joe. As weeks progressed, Joe’s teachers became more concerned, and his foster mother feared his enrollment was in jeopardy.

Before an aide could be assigned, the Strawberry Mansion preschool announced that Joe had to leave because of his behavior. He was expelled at age 3.

At the Education Law Center, we work with parents and caregivers of preschoolers who struggle to obtain what is legally required for their children. A system for “early intervention” is mandated by law, but failures of this system are having devastating consequences for children like Joe who are wrongly excluded from school.

Young children in crisis in Philadelphia wait months before evaluations are completed. Children with disabilities do not receive agreed-upon services or regularly have gaps in services from week to week. Many children go months without needed services like speech therapy, behavior therapy, and occupational therapy. These deficiencies run counter to the essential purpose of early intervention.

Early intervention is a coordinated set of educational services provided at no cost to facilitate the developmental progress of young children with disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires that, from birth until elementary school, children with developmental delays or disabilities receive early intervention services to allow them to learn necessary skills for early development — cognitive, social-emotional, physical, communication and language, and adaptive skills. These vital services must address all areas of need during a child’s earliest years of life.

Early intervention services really work.

Decades of research show that children’s earliest experiences play a central role in brain development. Positive early social/emotional development and physical health provide the strongest foundation for the development of cognitive and language skills essential for educational success. Early intervention services produce higher school achievement, greater independence, and positive family adaptation. Young children who have difficulty learning to speak receive targeted speech therapy. Four-year-olds who have difficulty playing receive social skills training. Preschoolers who are struggling to match like objects get specialized instruction. Children whose behavior puts them at risk of expulsion receive behavior interventions. This is the intention of federal and state laws that protect very young children with developmental delays and disabilities.

The rights of children include:

Early screening and evaluation referrals: Certain children at risk of developmental delays or disabilities must be screened automatically for eligibility. This includes children with low birth weight, children born to a chemically dependent mother, children experiencing homelessness, children with lead poisoning, or children with a substantiated case of abuse or neglect. Education agencies must use screening processes to identify all children who may be eligible. Parents can request evaluations if they suspect their children may have developmental issues.

Multidisciplinary evaluations: Once a parent consents for the evaluation for early intervention, the child undergoes a multidisciplinary evaluation process that involves a variety of assessments by different educational professionals, such as a school psychologist, speech therapist, occupational therapist, and social worker. The evaluation report becomes the guidepost for the child’s special education program.

Comprehensive services: Children deemed eligible for early intervention must receive comprehensive services that address all developmental delays or other needs stemming from their disability. Early intervention services may include specialized instruction, speech therapy, occupational therapy, behavior therapy, physical therapy, personal care assistance, and transportation.

Parental involvement in all aspects of decision-making: The success of early intervention services depends upon involved parents or caregivers. Parents are entitled to be involved in all aspects of decision-making about services and delivery. Parents who are limited-English-proficient must receive interpretation and translated educational documents in a language that they can understand. Parents have the right to disagree and have several avenues for dispute resolution.

But in Philadelphia, the system is not working. Young children are not evaluated promptly. There are delays and gaps in services. Children like Joe are locked out of learning, unprepared to enter kindergarten, and fall even farther behind their peers. These issues are exacerbated when young children experience homelessness or are in foster care and relocate around the city.

We must examine these widespread failures that disproportionately impact our most vulnerable children so that we can reclaim the potential and power of early intervention to vastly improve lives.

We cannot accept another expulsion of a 3-year-old.

Margie Wakelin (mwakelin@elc-pa.org) is a staff attorney at the Education Law Center in Philadelphia.
Jordan wins reelection as PFT president

Jerry Jordan won re-election as president of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers in February, turning back a strong challenge from an insurgent group that sought to move the union into more grassroots activism.

PFT issued a statement on Feb. 26 saying that with roughly 60% of the vote counted, Jordan was the clear winner, without giving a vote count. The challengers, the Caucus of Working Educators (WE), said Jordan and his team received 4,453 votes while its slate received 2,761 votes, with nearly 471 split ballots yet to be counted.

Although its ranks have been thinned by the growth of charters and by school closures, the PFT is the largest union local in the city with 11,000 members. Besides teachers, they include secretaries, paraprofessionals, and other school workers.

In his statement, Jordan thanked the members and said that his Collective Bargaining, or CB, team—which has run the union for since 1983—will continue to work for more investment in schools. He described the campaign as “spirited,” adding: “Together with the members of the PFT, the CB Team’s leadership has worked relentlessly to shift the anti-public education narrative that has recently swept the nation and permeated all levels of government.”

Kathleen Melville, who led the WE slate, congratulated Jordan and said in a statement that “we look forward to continuing to push for a more engaged and empowered PFT membership together.”

When the WE caucus first challenged the leadership in the election four years ago, it received 1,300 votes, or about a quarter of the total, and the turnout of eligible voters was 43%. This year, the voter turnout increased to nearly 60% and the caucus doubled its vote tally. The WE caucus won a third of the votes of those who returned their ballots.

“Given the popularity for ideas like open enrollment and fighting for higher wages, no healthcare concessions and enforceable smaller class sizes and caseloads, Working Educators hopes to work with the CB Team to bring this vision into our upcoming negotiations,” the WE statement said. The teachers’ contract expires in August.

Jordan, who comes from a family of educators, taught Spanish and English as a second language. He has been president of the PFT since 2007 and a union staffer since 1987.

In his statement, Jordan said, “We’re deeply committed to continuing to fight for the schools our educators and students deserve. The stakes are incredibly high— the future of our city, our state, and our nation rely on society’s collective commitment to investing in and prioritizing public education. The PFT, under the CB Team’s leadership, is well poised to lead the charge in Philadelphia. Our fight continues.”

Mayor selects charter school mentor, coach as new school board member

Mayor Kenney has named the eight current Board of Education members and one newcomer as his appointees for the board’s new term starting May 1. There is one open seat on the board due to Vice President Wayne Walker’s decision to step down for personal reasons.

The new appointee is Ameen Akbar, a graduate of the Philadelphia School District who worked for 14 years at YouthBuild Philadelphia Charter School in mentoring and service learning. YouthBuild is a school that helps young adults get their high school diploma while connecting them in intensive year with job training and career opportunities in the construction industry.

The Philadelphia native is now a senior associate at Grovider, a consulting firm that supports organizations in developing learning and development strategies. He also is the lead facilitator of Universal Companies’ BoysToMen program and an assistant basketball coach at Sankofa Freedom Academy Charter School.

“My experience as a student in Philadelphia’s public schools has been the single greatest driving force in my life, and both my career and my decision to apply for the Board of Education are guided by a belief in the transformative power of education,” Akbar said in a statement. “Over the years, I’ve been privileged to work with thousands of young people and to witness how students and communities thrive when the right resources and opportunities are present.”

Mayor Kenney said in a statement, “Ameen has dedicated his career to listening to young people and supporting them to pursue their full potential. His extensive experience working with former out-of-school youth has granted him valuable insight into the systems and lived experiences that directly impact the well-being and success of our city’s young people.”

Akbar was one of 27 candidates for the board sent to Mayor Kenney by the Educational Nominating Panel. City Council must approve the mayor’s appointments, a step that is new this year.

School Board overwhelmingly rejects two charter school proposals

The Board of Education denied two charter school applications at the Feb. 27 board meeting. One, a K-8 performing arts school proposed for West Philadelphia called the Joan Myers Brown Academy, was denied by a unanimous 8-0 vote. The other, a career-oriented North Philadelphia high school called the Health Sciences Leadership Charter School (HS2L), was denied 6-0, with two abstentions.

HS2L was a proposed health-and-science school that would have been located near Temple University. Its application was developed with the support of the Philadelphia School Partnership, and drew controversy soon after being announced, based its mission’s overlap with that of a nearby District-run school, the Kensington Health Science Academy (KHSA).

PSP staff visited KHSA this summer, studying its techniques and promising staff that a new “partnership” could be in the offing. Instead, PSP later announced that it would be supporting a second school that would have replicated KHSA’s mission, triggering an angry response from KHSA’s principal and staff.

KHSA supporters maintained that opening a new school with the same mission would undermine the Kensington school’s fragile advances, and that the money would be better spent on strengthening neighborhood schools.

The District charter office evaluation gave the HS2L proposal poor marks for academic and financial planning, and found staff and board alike short on necessary experience.

At the meeting, HS2L supporters made their final case to the board, arguing that there is no need to limit the number of health-and-science focused schools, since there are so many potential jobs in the field.

Joan Myers Brown Academy (JMDA), a school to be run by the String Theory management company, had applied twice before and been rejected both times. Once again, the board cited incomplete applications and the relatively poor performance of other String Theory schools.

String Theory runs two schools in Philadelphia, one of which, the Philadelphia Charter School for Arts & Sciences at H.B. Edmunds, closely matches the profile of the proposed new school. String Theory’s track record at Edmunds is not good, said Board President Joyce Wilkerson, and the new proposal offers no reason to think that results at JMDA would be any different.

String Theory founder Jason Corosante, speaking on behalf of the school’s “founding coalition,” gently chided Wilkerson for considering what he said was irrelevant information. “We are very proud and excited about our schools that String Theory manages,” Corosante said. “But the performance of these schools is immaterial under charter school law.” Corosante has indicated in the past that String Theory would appeal the denial to the state’s Charter Appeals Board.

—Bill Hangleby and Dale Mezzacappa
Public meetings in the first three study areas began in March with a second round planned for April.

By Bill Hangley, Jr.

Stakes are potentially high for all three “study areas” in this year’s Comprehensive School Planning Review process, which covers parts of South, North and West Philadelphia.

The goal of the CSPR process is to create clear K-12 pathways in every community, which could mean closing, expanding, or co-locating various schools. Each study area has hosted a series of closed-door meetings since the planning process officially launched in November to discuss local demographic data, enrollment patterns, and facility usage. The District’s CSPR team uses the data and feedback to develop “options” for each study area. Options include redrawning catchment zones, closing schools, and reorganizing grade configurations and feeder patterns.

Officials have said little about the review’s progress so far, but they have released summaries of the closed-door “study area committee” meetings, which were attended by small delegations of staff and select community members from each study area school.

The meeting summaries show that options being considered for South Philadelphia include transforming a swath of K-8 schools – including popular and crowded schools such as Meredith, Jackson, and Neibing – into K-5s and creating one or two new middle schools. In North and West Philadelphia, where heavy charter enrollment has drained District-run schools, officials are considering merging various elementary schools and repurposing several buildings.

The meeting summaries stress that all options for any study area are final and that new options could be considered.

Public opportunities to participate in CSPR have been limited. A round of public forums scheduled for January was postponed because the study area proposals were slow to develop. A planned parents survey has been “canceled at this time,” according to CSPR meeting summaries, while officials seek a “meaningful input alternative” that is “accessible and relevant.” Public comment has been limited to testimony at Board of Education meetings.

The first round of public CSPR meetings were held in early March, and the meetings are scheduled to be held again in early April. Each round will feature one forum in each of the three study areas, for a total of six community meetings altogether. The meetings will be open to all members of the public.

The forums begin with a brief introduction to the process and its goals, after which attendees are split up by school community to discuss the options developed by the CSPR team and the Study Area committees over the last three months.

District spokesperson Monica Lewis said the doors to the forums will be open to all members of the public and press, “as long as it is not disruptive.” Attendees who aren’t tied to any particular school community will be welcome to join one of the groups. Attendees will have time to check in with the other working groups at the end of the evening, she said, as well as ask questions of CSPR staff.

Senior District leaders such as Superintendent William Hite will not be on hand to discuss broad goals or hear general concerns. But Lewis said that one goal for the evening is to “gather input from the general public” about the process and the proposals generated “thus far.”

Behind closed doors, options take shape

Attendees at the closed-door meetings have been reluctant to speak on the record about the proceedings. A handful of independent observers have attended, including elected officials, school board members, and education advocates. The CSPR team has welcomed such visitors and offered them a separate observers’ table, from which they can watch the working groups in action.

One observer was City Councilman Mark Squilla, who attended the Jan. 21 session in South Philadelphia. Squilla, who arrived knowing almost nothing about CSPR, said he was “pleasantly surprised” by a substantive and well-managed meeting that tackled important questions.

“This is a process I believe we need,” Squilla said. Parents and school staff worked diligently to follow the CSPR team’s lead, he said, and a lot of interesting ideas were aired. But the session steered clear of hard questions about specific schools, he said, and he’s not clear whether and how lawmakers like himself will get to weigh in on the District’s final choices.

Who makes the final decisions – and how will we be involved?

- City Councilman Mark Squilla

One option was City Councilman Mark Squilla, who attended the Jan. 21 session in South Philadelphia. Squilla, who attended knowing almost nothing about CSPR, said he was “pleasantly surprised” by a substantive and well-managed meeting that tackled important questions. The updated CSPR timeline calls for study area committees to prepare preliminary recommendations by April. Final recommendations are to be presented to the board in June.

Not all potential changes require board approval, but District officials say that any votes will likely take place in the fall. Implementation planning would then begin immediately.

Study area updates

For Study Area One, a swath of South Philadelphia stretching from the Delaware River to the Schuylkill, meeting summaries show that a core concern is the imbalance of enrollment between the east and west sides of Broad Street. Demand for elementary slots is high in the relatively prosperous east side; buildings are emtpy on the lower-income, less-gentrified west side.

District officials are considering options that include transforming South Philadelphia’s many K-8s (including Meredith, Neibing, Childs, and Jackson) to K-5 schools, while adding one or two new middle schools – potentially one on each side of Broad Street.

In Study Area Two, a chunk of North Philadelphia that includes parts of Hunting Park and Kensington, the issue is under-enrollment. Several schools – Cramp (K-5), Munoz-Marin (K-8), and Sheppard (K-4) – are at less than 70% of capacity, and high demand for charter enrollment means that enrollment in District schools is not likely to increase.

One option that the District is considering is to reassign all students from Sheppard Elementary and repurpose its building. Sheppard students would enroll at De Burgos Elementary (K-8). With just 164 students, Sheppard is operating at about 43% capacity, by far the lowest in the North Philadelphia Study Area.

Another option is to “seek programming alternatives for underenrolled schools” in order to make them more effective and appealing. Also being considered: a plan to reorganize Cramp from a K-5 to K-4, in order to match the three other K-4s in the area (Elkin, Sheppard, and Willard) and simplify the middle-school transition.

For Study Area Three, a patch of far West Philadelphia that includes Overbrook and Wynneweld, concerns mirror those in North Philadelphia. Charter enrollment is growing and overall population is relatively stable, leaving the study area’s four schools operating at about half their overall capacity.

Here, too, the District’s options include essentially closing one school in order to drive up enrollment in others, and creating a new middle school while transforming the remaining K-8s to K-5s. The potential plan would be to repurpose Overbrook Elementary (K-8) and send its students to Gompers or Cassidy, which also serve K-8. A related option for this study area is to reconfigure its three K-8s to K-5s, and also create a new 450-student middle school to handle the displaced students.

While it is unclear what exactly these final proposals will include, what is clear is that the decisions made in the next eight to 12 weeks could affect the study area for generations to come.
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Officials, PFT call for ‘disaster declaration’

Schools need money now to ensure safety, they say.

A coalition of state and local lawmakers, along with the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, called on Gov. Wolf to issue a formal “disaster declaration” for the School District of Philadelphia, freeing up cash to clean up asbestos and other toxins in the city’s aging schools.

“We have a Rainy Day Fund — and it’s raining in many of our schools,” said State Rep. Sharif Street, a member of the Fund our Facilities Coalition, which made its demands at a Feb. 14 rally at the Cione Recreation Center in Port Richmond. “We have repairs we’ve waited 30 years to make.”

State Sen. Vince Hughes said: “If the court was warped, the Sixers wouldn’t play,” but Philadelphia students have to attend dangerous schools or be declared truant. “We’re approaching a situation where we have to shut the whole thing down.”


“It’s a shame we have to do this multiple times,” said Squilla, who called on Wolf to step up the funding and for the District to improve its “cooperation and collaboration” over asbestos and toxin issues.

District officials must work better with the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, contractors, and school communities, Squilla said. “Even when we fix things, we have to go back and make sure we did it right,” he said. “We can bring in as much money as we want, but if we don’t collaborate, it’s not going to work.”

The coalition’s call is unlikely to produce fast results. Money from the Rainy Day Fund can only be spent with the approval of two-thirds of the Republican-controlled legislature — a heavy lift for Gov. Wolf, a Democrat. Wolf’s proposed budget includes $1 billion for toxin cleanup statewide, but approval is months away, if it comes at all.

But funds are essential for manpower, said PFT President Jerry Jordan. “One of the reasons we’re calling for the declaration of emergency is because the District needs to have the funding to hire a workforce,” he said. “The lack of capacity is huge. You’re not going to be able to solve the problem if you don’t have the personnel.”

The coalition’s latest demand comes after 10 schools were closed at various times this year to clean up loose asbestos.

“There needs to be a real commitment to creating a better environment for our teachers, for our students,” said Kathryn Lagara, a Richmond Elementary teacher who spoke out at the February rally.

Richmond teachers were pleased that their school was being inspected after reports of improper asbestos repairs. However, they pointed out that the toxin issue represents just the tip of an iceberg of neglect. Dirty floors, rodent droppings, and messy halls are seen regularly in the school, they said.

“Many of us choose to work in Philadelphia,” said Lagara. “The fact that we shouldn’t be afforded the same things that children and teachers in more affluent areas have is astounding.”

A new budget must be approved by the end of June, and negotiations generally go down to the wire.

— Bill Hangley
Read by 4th prepares littlest learners for a life of reading

Citywide program works with families at home and in neighborhood libraries.

By Connie Langland

On a sunny Saturday morning children's librarian Christina Holmes took a seat and began reading to the moms, dads and tots clustered around her in the infant/toddler corner of the Lucien E. Blackwell West Philadelphia Regional Library.

"Open them, shut them, give a little clap, clap, clap," said Holmes, as parents helped tiny hands open and close. "Open them, shut them, give a little clap, clap, clap."

The youngest in the crowd was about six months, the oldest about two. For 30 minutes, the children absorbed rhymes, sounds and stories as well as the bubbling and chatter of the toddlers and grownups around and behind them.

The weekly event, called Read, Baby, Read, is among a wide variety of efforts – of both small and large scale – that make up the initiative known as Read by 4th.

Read, Baby, Read is two years along at two libraries in the city, Blackwell and Richmond – and expanding to 10 other locations over the next three years.

Another library-backed program, Learning Spaces and Early Learning Spaces, which promotes early literacy best practices in child-care centers, started two years ago in two impoverished Philadelphia zip codes – and expanded to four, with plans to reach seven parts of the city next year.

And yet another program, Parent+Child+, which trains parents at home in ways to promote literacy and numeracy in young children, started in North Philadelphia, expanded to West Philadelphia and South Philadelphia – and plans to expand yet again, to Southwest Philadelphia.

The focus on the early years is intentional.

"We've got 85 percent of cognitive development happening in the first five years of life," said Christine Caputo, chief of youth services and programs at the Free Library of Philadelphia.

Both Read, Baby, Read and Early Learning Spaces are programs that seek to promote early literacy among parents and caregivers. The question, said Caputo, is "How can we set kids up for success with all those early literacy and language development skills and practices, so that they are not starting out behind when they enter kindergarten?"

The initiative to bring early-childhood literacy specialists to child-care providers aims to make a big, lasting impact. The specialists visit child-care centers, family child-care homes and group child-care homes in neighborhoods (identified by zip code) with high populations of young children, numerous child-care centers, lower literacy levels and higher poverty levels plus a neighborhood library.

To date, the specialists are reaching 31 programs, where they help set up a reading area in the classroom and outfit the space with books, shelves, rugs and soft seating. More books arrive monthly.

"The books are high-quality, diverse and representative of the children attending those centers," said Devon Lautenslager, who runs the program.

Providers receive coaching around literacy and language development twice a month and attend four professional development sessions a year at the local library. "Our teachers are gaining so much confidence around what they're doing," Lautenslager said. "We're seeing classroom environments that are really changing and becoming literacy rich."

The Read by 4th campaign launched in Philadelphia in 2015 and has more than 100 partners including foundations, the School District, the Free Library and the city as well as nonprofits, other governmental agencies, corporate partners and volunteers.

Building home libraries, and training teachers and parents are among ongoing initiatives, said Jenny Bogoni, Read by 4th's executive director.

Philadelphia is part of the national Campaign for Grade Level Reading, which supports efforts at the local, state and national levels to raise awareness. That group cites research showing that students need to be proficient readers by the end of third grade to master more complex subject matter beginning in fourth grade. Yet nationally two-thirds of fourth graders and four out of five low-income students need reading help.

The Campaign, based in Washington, has support from a wide swath of education-related groups.

A ripple effect for the whole family

Where the Free Library's Literacy in Early Learning Spaces seeks to train child-care providers, the Parent+Child+ program seeks to coach parents, in their own homes, in ways to promote literacy and learning about numbers – numeracy – with their very young children.

The initiative at multiple sites in Philadelphia, with support from the GreenLight Fund, is part of a national program, four decades old, that seeks to increase school readiness, decrease the need for special education, and improve high graduation rates by supporting reading and play activities for young children in the home.

"It's the two-generation strategy," said Omar Woodard, GreenLight's executive director. "We can do a lot of work with young people by themselves but children exist in the context of families. We want to boost the capacities and possibilities of parents. We don't believe it's trickles-down, we believe [the support] has a ripple effect for the whole family. Improving parent-child interaction isn't good for just one child, it's good for the rest of the family as well."

The program opened four years ago in partnership with the Philadelphia Housing Authority and Public Health Management Corporation in the Sharpwood/Blumberg neighborhood in North Philadelphia. A second program opened in the Mantua neighborhood, with yet another set to open in the Bartram neighborhood.

The home-visit specialist works with the family over two years. "We're seeing better interactions between parents and the child, we're seeing higher literacy and numeracy scores, and we're seeing 100% being signed up for quality pre-K slots. Over the last four years this has been incredibly effective and transformational investment," Woodard said.

Other Read by 4th initiatives are far smaller in scale. The Art Sphere Inc. nonprofit “uses art and music, mindfulness and movement” as a means of promoting literacy in its school and library programs. For young children, Art Sphere offers a lunchtime series on Tuesdays at the Fishtown Library branch.

"Parents and kids come to make art and make music centered around books," said Director Kristin Groenveld. "Our staff reads books, but they make it more interactive with art and music projects. We're engaging all the children's senses so they're learning spatially as well as auditorily, as well as visually."

The preschoolers learn about book making, "they do singalongs, they do nursery rhymes" so that when they begin to learn to read "they actually very familiar with the process through song," Groenveld said.

At the Read, Baby, Read session at the Blackwell library branch, Kimberly Braxton and her 15-month-old toddler Clifton have been regulars since before he turned 1. "He likes to come and track the other babies and toddlers," Braxton said.

Besides story time, the Braxtons planned to check out children's books featuring food, colors and animals – "things he likes right now," she said.

Yahala Fisher, with her son Semaj, almost one, have been visiting story time "since he was three months old," Fisher said. Read, Baby, Read "helps him learn new words and meet new people and become interested in reading. That's what I want."

And that's the point, said Naisha Patterson, who runs the program. Read, Baby, Read "is helping him learn new words and meet new people and become interested in reading. That's what I want."

"The point is, said Patterson, who runs the program. Read, Baby, Read and other library programs seek to "support emergent literacy, language development and purposeful play" for the city's youngest patrons and their parents. Parents, Patterson said, "are basically the child's first teacher."
Early Childhood Education

Drexel teams up with family ambassadors, child care providers to promote learning

University sees early education as vital to alleviating poverty in West Philadelphia.

By Huntly Collins

Donna Drain works full-time as a cook at Philadelphia’s Lamberton Elementary School in the city’s Overbrook section. But her part-time job is back where she lives, in West Philadelphia’s Mantua neighborhood, where she talks to parents, grandparents and other family caregivers about the importance of high-quality childcare and early childhood education.

“By the time they are three years old, 90 percent of the brain is already active,” Drain explained as she mingled one recent evening with some 150 West Philadelphia residents who filled a dining hall at Drexel University’s Dornsife Center for Neighborhood Partnerships at 35th and Spring Garden streets.

Drain, a grandmother and African American, has lived on 37th Street in Mantua for 50 years. She is one of 40 community residents who work part-time as “family ambassadors” in an innovative Drexel project that aims to ensure all children in the surrounding neighborhoods — a federal “promise zone” — are ready for kindergarten and reading at grade level by the third grade.

The ambassadors, who typically work weekends and nights, are paid $12 an hour to spread the word about just how important early education is for a child’s success in school and later life. They talk to community surveys, meet with family caregivers, distribute free books and even go into homes to help parents and grandparents acquire the skills they need to promote learning at an early age.

The idea is that trained parents and grandparents, reaching out to other family caregivers who live in the same neighborhood, will be more effective advocates for early childhood education than professionals from outside the community.

“I show the parents how they might interact with their children,” Drain explained. “If they are making spaghetti, for instance, they might say to the child, ‘I can’t find the spaghetti. Can you help me find the spaghetti?’”

Even that kind of basic association between a word and the object it represents helps put very young children on the path to reading, she said.

Called Action for Early Learning (AFEL), the Drexel project, which is supported by federal and foundation funding, has drawn the attention of education advocates to children, range from 1, the lowest, to 4, the highest.

The ratings, which take into account such factors as the ratio of teachers to children, range from 1, the lowest, to 4, the highest.

The family ambassador component of Drexel’s approach to early learning isn’t the only thing that distinguishes it from other programs in Philadelphia. Unlike most other early learning initiatives, AFEL is university-based, making use of Drexel’s enormous educational resources including its schools of education, law and medicine. Another difference is that AFEL focuses on the education of children from birth to age 8; by contrast, other programs tend to focus on only one age cohort — infants, toddlers, or pre-kindergarten children. And, unlike traditional programs, AFEL aims to reach children in a specific area.

The target area, designated by the federal government, is bounded by the Schuylkill River, 38th Street, Girard Avenue and Sansom Street. It includes all or portions of eight neighborhoods — Mantua, Powelton Village, West Powelton, Belmont/West Belmont, Mill Creek, Saunders Park and East Parkside. These neighborhoods have some of the city’s highest poverty rates and some of the lowest literacy rates. In Mantua, the poorest of the neighborhoods, about half the residents live below the poverty line, almost twice the rate for the city as a whole.

Under the leadership of John Fry, founder of Drexel’s president in 2010, the university set out to forge public-private partnerships that would stimulate both economic development and poverty reduction in the immediate neighborhoods around the university while also pushing back against gentrification that would drive out low-income residents.

Donna Drain, grandmother and family ambassador

Maria Walker, AFEL’s director.

Tiffany Cleveland, a single mother of four children, has served as a family

ambassador for more than two years. She said the training in early child development provided to AFEL ambassadors has not only helped her become a strong advocate for early learning but also improved her ability to parent her own children. At last month’s dinner, she cradled her month-old daughter while keeping her eye out for new families in the dining hall who might need to know about quality childcare. “Most of the families really appreciate the information,” Cleveland said.

Like a number of other ambassadors, Cleveland has parlayed her ambassador training into a full-time job in the child-care field.

Reaching for the STARS

About 1,100 children, almost all of them from low-income African American families, are enrolled at the 26 childcare sites. Some providers are home-based, others operate out of centers. A majority benefit from government subsidies for free or reduced-cost care provided by federal, state and local dollars, including the revenue raised by Philadelphia’s soda tax for PHLpreK.

More than half of the 26 providers are considered “high quality” under the Keystone STARS rating system used by the Pennsylvania Department of Education to evaluate childcare programs. AFEL regards the others as “rising STARS” and works intensively with them to boost their ratings.

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Early Childhood Education

Jerrae Pressley, 24, attended Taylor’s Learning Academy as a child and now she teaches there.

some of whom have called West Philadelphia home for half a century or more.

In 2014, President Barack Obama named the neighborhoods adjacent to Drexel as one of 22 national “promise zones.” While the designation didn’t bring with it any federal funds, it gave “preference points” to public-private partners within the zone when they applied for federal grants to alleviate poverty.

By then, Drexel was already working with Morton McMichael Elementary School in Mantua to save it from threatened closure due to low enrollment and generally poor performance on state tests. With Drexel’s help, the test scores improved and the school, a fixture at the corner of 35th Street and Fairmont Avenue since 1892, was saved.

“The school then came back to us and said, ‘Our children are not starting school kindergarten-ready. What can you do to help us?’” recalled Walker.

The William Penn Foundation, along with the Lenfest Foundation, stepped forward with a planning grant to help launch Action for Early Learning. The vision was to mobilize existing resources in the neighborhood, including grassroots groups, to improve early childhood education in the catchments for McMichael and five other public schools in the area.

In 2016, the effort paid off: the U.S. Department of Education awarded a $30 million grant over five years to Drexel, the lead partner in a community revitalization effort. The funding, made possible by its “promise zone” status, was not just to go toward education, but also housing, legal assistance, medical care and other needs.

The model, based on New York City’s Harlem Children’s Zone, was audacious. What could a university best known for its engineering and technology programs do to improve the education of the youngest children in a predominantly African-American area where 65% of some 45 childcare centers were ranked as low quality under the Keystone STAR system?

A lot, it turns out.

In 2014, when AFEL began its efforts, fewer than 50% of the area’s 2,000 children under the age of five were in high-quality childcare, as measured by the Keystone STARs system. Today, the figure is 77 percent. Over the past six years, AFEL’s family ambassador program has organized a book-drop up and down Lancaster Avenue that has recycled more than 25,000 children’s books to give to area residents. Across 10 AFEL-affiliated childcare programs, average pre-literacy levels rose from the 31st percentile in 2014 to the 44th percentile in 2017.

Pre-literacy is measured by a standardized test in which children are asked to associate words with the appropriate picture.

Although AFEL started with an emphasis on literacy, it has now expanded to include the social and emotional development of the child. AFEL also has become a driver of jobs, job training and black entrepreneurship in West Philadelphia.

Twenty-three of the family ambassadors have gone on to full-time employment in the childcare field, and many of the childcare providers in the alliance have increased their STAR rating, becoming successful small-business owners.

A high-achieving home-based program

Xavier’s Family Childcare occupies the first floor of a three-story, red-brick row home in Mantua. It opens at 6 a.m. and closes at 6 p.m. five days a week. At 9:30 one morning in early February, nine children between the ages of eighteen months and five had already had their breakfast and were engaged in an activity to promote social and emotional development.

They sat in a circle on the carpeted floor in a dining room repurposed as a classroom. Children’s books, alphabet (continued on page 12)
Early Childhood Education

Drexel and family

(continued from page 11)

posters and other educational materials filled every corner. One by one, the children stood and made their way around the circle, each introducing themselves by name to each of the others and asking how they wanted to be greeted that morning. My name is Naleyah, would you like a handshake or a pat on the back?” After Naleyah, who is four years old, the others took a turn: Sarah, 5; Kamari, 3; Ava, 4; Nadir, 4; Kennedy, 4, and several others.

Two workers – Miss Terrie, who tends to the infants, and Miss Monica, who works with the older children – kept close watch. Through AFEL, these and other workers, most of whom live in the neighborhood, get help in earning accreditation as child development associates. Miss Terrie already has her accreditation, and Miss Monica is working on hers. The accreditation, offered through a course at Drexel’s Dornsife School of Public Health, requires workers a national stamp of approval that they are qualified to work with young children in daycare and early childhood centers.

When the Xavier’s children completed their round of introductions, Janelle Golden, who owns and directs the home-based program, turned to her Google Home Box. “Hey, Google, music, please!” Soon, the children were up on their feet, their bodies moving in time to the rhythm of their favorite songs. “We can do it!” exclaimed Naleyah, who was the last to join the circle. “It’s the final song in the final program,” Golden said. “The community has something to offer. We are not just bringing something to the community. As it moves forward, AFEL faces some significant challenges. One is how to retain teachers. Like the best childcare programs across the city, AFEL works hard to train teachers at its 26 sites only to see them hired away after they are trained because public schools and other employers can pay them more. To address that issue, experts agree that annual salaries for childcare workers – which typically range from $16,000 for a teacher aide to $27,000 for a lead teacher – need to be dramatically increased. The only way that can happen is if federal and state governments step up with increased public funding.

As it expands its reach to kindergarten students, AFEL must also navigate a complex web of kindergarten feeder patterns. Every year, some 350 children from the West Philadelphia area enter kindergarten at about 40 different elementary schools, some of them far outside the promise zone. “That’s a challenge to make a connection,” said Jordan Wilson, AFEL’s data manager, as he displayed a map that had red lines running in every direction to indicate the different elementary schools that area children attend.

Another major challenge is how to keep AFEL’s low-income families from being driven out of the neighborhood by gentrification. As part of the 2017 tax-reform legislation, Congress created “opportunity zones” in poor areas, including West Philadelphia. If real estate developers invest in these zones, they can delay capital gains taxes and avoid federal taxes altogether on the profits they earn from their new development.

Drexel officials say they are not seeking any opportunity-zone funds for development around the campus, a decision that pleases neighborhood activists who have been fighting gentrification. For many years, Drexel has advocated for “equitable development” – development that provides new jobs for neighborhood residents while also offering support for long-time homeowners and renters.

Among other collaborative initiatives, Drexel helps local residents stay in their homes by providing assistance with critical repairs and by helping owners untangle difficult title and foreclosure issues. It also assists those who are displaced with finding affordable rental housing in the area. On the job front, the university is part of an initiative that prepares workers for the many new jobs emerging in University City. And at its Dornsife Center, the university offers adult education, high-school completion courses, career counseling, job fairs and job training to members of the community.

AFEL ambassadors like Drain, who has worked in the program for four years, are well aware of the role that early education plays in2302020

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AFEL ambassadors like Drain, who has worked in the program for four years, are well aware of the role that early education plays in equipping West Philadelphia for the century jobs emerging around the Drexel campus and elsewhere in Philadelphia. Children who don’t get an early start often fall behind in school and never catch up, Drain said.

She recalled the story of Rakeem, a third-grader who was too ashamed to admit he couldn’t read. “I just set him down and told him, ‘Don’t you be embarrassed. If you don’t tell nobody you can’t read, you won’t get no help.’” Slowly, Drain got Rakeem to open up to her. She began showing him words she had written on notecards. First two-letter words, then three-letter words. Soon, Rakeem was on his way, a little late, but taking his first steps toward reading.
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Modern, resource-rich classrooms, more academic direction — it is a new day for kindergarten

“Literacy blocks” dominate the schedule, but play and fun is still important.

By Dale Mezzacappa

When kindergarten started in the 2018-19 at Webster Elementary School, the teachers were just as excited as the students — if not more so.

Bernadette O’Brien, with 21-years at Webster, remembers thinking, "OMG, best thing ever!" as she looked around her refurbished room in Webster’s Little School House, a self-contained, 2001 addition to the 60s-era Port Richmond school.

She looked at the new teal and gray paint on the cinder block walls and the big round tables that have plenty of room and little indentations that spaced out the children evenly on their red, blue, and purple chairs. She spied the yellow stools that acted as balance balls for children who might want or need to work on their gross motor skills.

In the center of the teal wall was a huge computer screen, compatible with the new classroom iPads, better and more interactive than the old whiteboard. There was a reading and writing nook full of books, a LEGO station, brightly colored cubbies, bins with math manipulatives, drawers full of letters attached to key rings, a big white rocking chair next to the reading rug.

In all, everything a kindergarten teacher could want. The children, too, when they arrived, said were wide-eyed with wonder.

Prior to the modernization, O’Brien and other kindergarten teachers, with just $100 a year allotted for supplies, had to buy materials themselves or re-purpose their own children’s playthings.

In the old days, “you had to pack up your entire room, everything you own,” said Maria Binck, Webster’s reading specialist. When she was a classroom teacher, “five different times, I had to put it all in a truck and drive it home. I know how expensive it is.”

Over the last several years, the School District of Philadelphia has invested heavily in modernizing its kindergarten through third grade classrooms, part of a concerted push toward improving early literacy across the District. In particular, the goal is to help all students reach the important milestone of reading proficiently by the end of third grade.

The modernizations started in 2017, and cover anywhere between seven and 10 schools a year. So far, 232 classrooms have been upgraded, and when the project is done at the end of the 2020-21 school year, the total will be over 500.

Which schools to prioritize is based on those that have been on the lower end of third grade test scores, and where the buildings are in good enough condition for a new investment.

Besides the modernizations, the District has also invested in literacy coaches for the schools, some in-house and some from the Children’s Literacy Initiative, which specializes in creating language-rich classrooms. The “comprehensive literacy framework” offers a checklist and timetable for activities, including a daily, required two hour “literacy block.”

To be sure, the literacy block is not about the teacher doing “stand and deliver” in front of the classroom, but combines whole group reading with small group and individualized instruction. Some students write, or act out stories with puppets, or curl up in the reading nook with a book color coded so students can pick out ones appropriate for their level.

“Early literacy goes all the way from birth to third grade,” said Diane Castelbuono, the District’s deputy chief of early learning. “How kids learn can be traced back to early language and brain development in their earliest years.”

That document also undergoes periodic revisions to keep up with the latest research in the science of reading. One is due in time for the next school year.

“I would say in previous iterations, we’ve been probably less focused on phonics and phonemic awareness in the lower grades than we should have been,” said Castelbuono.

While doing that, the District has also worked to maintain a healthy balance between maximizing young children’s most effective means of learning — which is play — with activities involving words and letters that are more structured.

“Playing and learning are not separate, ever,” Castelbuono said. “Kindergarten is all about learning through play.”

The idea that there is somehow a conflict between children learning their letters and being able to play is misplaced, she said.

“They are not mutually exclusive things,” she said. “It does make me a little exasperated when we get asked about learning vs. play. They are inter-related. A good kindergarten curriculum will never discount play.”

She points out that the modernized classrooms have arts centers, a puppet stage for acting out stories, and a kitchen area.

There are anxieties, however, that the increasing emphasis on structuring time makes it harder for kindergarten teachers to try out new things and to address the widely varying skill levels in classrooms that can have as many as 30 children. For instance, while writing — and its precursor, drawing — is part of the framework, it can be given short shrift.

In one class, for instance, said that “it’s definitely going in the direction of more academic vs. traditional play, like the housekeeping centers used to be. “Personally, I’m a little sad there isn’t as much playing with dolls and in the kitchen.”

She isn’t really complaining, though. “I can incorporate it in other ways. In the reading tent, they can role-play. I’ve learned to adapt, and the kids are enjoying it and benefiting from it. In math and literacy, they are more advanced than they ever were.

“They think everything is play. It hasn’t hurt them.”

And while adults might want to draw a sharp line between activities that specifically promote reading and writing, for the kids the line is pretty blurry, especially in the hands of a skilled teacher with the latest in equipment and materials, working in a cheerful room.

In the LEGO center, they are learning about characters; they have cards depicting settings, like a farm, on which to arrange their people and animals. “It’s not like the traditional activities that we did, but it’s great, and they are learning so many things,” O’Brien said.

One of Webster’s other veteran kindergarten teachers, Kayla Gust, has been doing this for 29 years. The modernization, she said, “is amazing, it gave us so many good things.” She especially praises the extensive professional development for the teachers, offered after school and on some Saturdays, organized by Paula Sahm, educational facilities planner in the Office of Childhood Education.

“Playing and learning are not separate, ever,” Castelbuono said. “Kindergarten is all about learning through play.”

The idea that there is somehow a conflict between children learning (continued on page 16)
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Kindergarten

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Guest loves it. “I learned a whole new way of using technology at the Apple store,” she said.

Like O’Brien, she is a little nostalgic for some of the traditional practices and says that the District is definitely moving kindergarten in a more academic direction. Still, “The reading center, the listening center, the writing center, they absolutely love,” she said. “Everything is beautiful, the children love it and are happy to be in such a beautiful environment.”

She adds with a wink, “Not that my room was so bad before.”

O’Brien added that the best thing that happened in Webster was principal Sherri Arabia’s decision to use discretionary funds in the school’s budget to hire an extra kindergarten teacher and reduce class size to 20.

The smaller class size allows her to spend more time with students in small groups, individually to discern their strengths and weaknesses. Plus, she said, behavior is better with 20 rather than 30 students.

“That’s the most beneficial thing,” she said. “We have five kindergartners this year. Last year, there were four. Now I can help more kids, it’s beautiful. I pray it continues.”

On Feb. 11, Webster students and those across the District were celebrating the 100th day of school, and many of them dressed up as if they were 100 years old. They also, with help from parents or guardians, made posters with 100 items on it.

Jeremy Hernandez’s mom helped him with a poster that had 100 fake coins along with Mario and goombas from the Mario Bros. video game. Jer- emy, who was wearing a paper mouse-tache and had gray in his hair, said his mom came up with the idea.

Jared O’Gorman was proud of his poster, which had 40 cupcakes and 100 beads that formed the number “100.”

“I helped cut out the cupcakes,” he boasted, while eying Jeremy’s poster, display style, 100 bricks high (or long) were once her own children’s. There is a smart board, but not one hooked up to iPads and projectors where she can draw and write on it, and manipulate different software programs, and where the kids can do it also.

Instead, two ancient iMacs sit unused in one corner of the room. With children who are accustomed to smartphones and tablets, the desktops might as well be papyrus and quills.

When asked about the impending updates to her classroom, she said, “I’m thrilled. I have chills thinking about it. It’s a lot to keep five-year-olds engaged.”

Regardless, new standards and individual iPads, she noted, she will be able to prepare lessons at home.

At the same time, Griffin thinks it is fine to use explicit lessons to teach reading and spending a lot of time on activities like cutting out and coloring letters and words. “We still need to work on phonics skills,” she said. “I feel like if they learn to read before they leave here, they’re going to be successful. If they know their letters and sounds, they’ll be more successful the day they don’t know.”

She is looking forward to how the iPads and interactive smart board will help with math skills. But she is also looking forward to the puppet center and the room for dramatic play.

“I can’t wait to go to professional development to get started,” she said — which will start in March for teachers like her whose classrooms are due for makeovers over the summer.

Regardless, all the students looked to be enjoying themselves. She and the other teachers all mentioned Fun Fridays, when the kids can pick their center and “relax” with their friends.

Over the years, she said, different leaders had different emphases, and under some, “We weren’t allowed to do certain things.” When schedules were rigid, 10 minutes for this, five for that, “it was really hard, the kids were engaged, and you’d say, time’s up, sometimes you needed five minutes more.”

A packed schedule

Now, she said, the curriculum is still structured; there are timelines, literacy and math blocks, and established times for science and social studies. “There’s so much packed in a day,” she said.

But there are also “brain breaks” and exercise and singing. The blocks are longer, with 20 minutes shared reading, 30 minutes writing, for example. The 100 day celebration was a lot about math, but it also provided some freedom and a lot of fun.

“I feel that children are more engaged when they have time to incorporate play into the centers,” said Grif- fin. “I had a kitchen center, it was also a literacy center. They had menus and grocery store fliers and took food orders. They were playing, and they were learning, reading, print and writing.”

Amanda Kane leads the other kinder- garten located in the portable space. It’s her third year teaching at that level. She has also taught “every other grade” through eighth, she said.

“This is where I’m meant to be,” she said. “It’s where you see the biggest growth. They are so eager. When they get to play, they are able to naturally learn certain skills, like social-emotion- al ones, how to share, how to work together. Instead of me telling them, they learn together.

“I think they’re able to learn more if they express themselves through play. They build a tower of blocks, a parking structure, and apartment building, they can talk about where they live.”

Does she like the literacy blocks? “I feel, sometimes, we work to put pressure on kids in a certain way, and it hinders their ability to come to their own way of learning.” It’s better, she said, that “they come to their own conclusions instead of us telling them what to learn.”

The 100 day projects, for example, were a big learning experience as well as a way to involve parents. Some of the projects “were so good that they asked if they could clap for their classmates.” I said, ‘of course you can clap.’”

As far as the updated classroom, “I cannot wait. I have been in the school district 17 years and to have a modern- ized classroom blows my mind. I think it will help students learn when they see new things, and feel our own excite- ment. We’ll be able to open things up to them and they’ll share in the excitement. Even if we’re just getting an interactive smartboard. But we’re getting new tables, chairs, manipulatives...it’s a new day.”

Note: Early kindergarten registration is open until May 29 for all students who will be 5 years old by Sept. 1. More information is available at https://www.philasd. org/studentplacement/services/kindergarten-registration/
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Providers seek to get the message across that pre-K isn’t just day care, and that parents have a responsibility to treat it like school.

By Bill Hangley

The Black History Month celebration is underway at Wonderspring Early Education, and Helena Walton is beaming. She doesn’t just see children getting ready for school. She sees them getting ready for life.

“For me, and a lot of other parents that are here, this is the place,” she says. “It’s like a family learning together. They’re really teaching things.”

Walton is part of a packed house of parents and grandparents who have come to this child care center in Powelton Village to see their children celebrate African American achievement. Boys and girls of every color have dressed up as famous role models — Harriet Tubman, Jesse Owens, Barack and Michelle Obama — to imagine themselves as doctors, artists, athletes and civic leaders. As proud families watch, the children sing, dance, giggle and applaud each other, happily acting out a future in which they star as striving heroes.

“Walton glows as she watches, the timeless smile of a grown person watching children thrive. She has spent 30 years in this neighborhood, and she knows Wonderspring — until recently Montgomery Early Learning Center — well.

“It’s been a big change over the years,” Walton says when the show is over. “In the beginning you’d have children come here to just get watched over. There was not the learning experience, the social skills. Not the drive to have them do good, or be about something, or know their worth.”

As Wonderspring’s offerings have evolved, she says, the children have flourished: “Being able to speak out, being independent, being proud of what they’re becoming, being motivated.”

Quality: reading, writing, curiosity, confidence

Ask Philadelphia’s educators and public officials what distinguishes “quality” pre-K from day care, and they’ll talk about structure and rigor. Effective early education, they say, carefully and steadily builds specific learning skills. It relies on a well-planned curriculum, qualified professionals, and age-appropriate classroom settings. The “Keystone Stars” system Pennsylvania uses to rate quality measures everything from staff training and curriculum to hygiene and signage, and few would challenge the value of those metrics.

But ask parents and grandparents what makes a “quality” preschool, and talk will quickly turn from the academic to the social and emotional.

Lynn Dyches, another Wonderspring client, is one such grandparent. Like Walton, she was delighted by the confident and creative Black History Month performances. Her grandson and his classmates are “learning to encourage themselves,” she said, “to be wonderful people as they grow.”

That’s invaluable in a city like Philadelphia, Dyches said, where dangerous streets and overworked families can leave many young children crippling isolated.

“Shuts a lot of people down when they have to engage with others. And in this setting, they’re learning so early to engage,” Dyches said. “It gives them their voice. They won’t be so shy and closed in. It’ll help them deal with pressure, because they’re not so bottled up in their own heads.”

Wonderspring Director Elisha Mattheis said classroom teachers value pre-Ks social and emotional aspects as much as parents do.

“All the kindergarten teachers ask us is, ‘Can they sit in a chair? Can they regulate their emotions?’” Mattheis said. “They don’t care about the ABCs. They want that child to be able to regulate themselves, as a person.”

Educators and officials agree: the need for pre-K is most acute in Philadelphia’s lowest-income neighborhoods. But they also agree that children of every walk of life need support during the 0-6 years. High-quality preschool should be universal, they say, even if Philadelphia’s growing pre-K system still isn’t.

“There’s this concept of universal pre-K, but ... we’re not really at a universal pre-K model,” said Diane Castelbuono, the Philadelphia School District’s deputy chief of early education.

In Philadelphia, pre-K services are funded and provided through a variety of state, local and federal sources, each with its own eligibility requirements and subsidies. City-funded pre-K is free for anyone. State-funded pre-K has income requirements. No single point of contact can tell parents everything that’s available. A parent walking into a place like Wonderspring might find a free slot, a low-cost slot, a full-price slot, or no slots at all.

“We have different providers, who aren’t on the same platform, who can’t share information with each other, and who are somewhat in competition with each other,” Castelbuono said.

City and District officials are working “really closely” to make it easier for families to easily access all their options, she said, but the job has just begun.

“We’re making some good headway,” Castelbuono said. “But it’s not easy to do.”

Parent needs: convenience, affordability, & reliability first

The value of pre-K is by no means universally understood. Researchers are continually discovering new facets of early development, revealing more and more about the importance of the earliest learning years.

“We’re learning so much more about the brain,” said Castelbuono. Much has been studied about what’s happening for three- and four-year-olds, she said, but “we’re learning now that 0-3 is maybe even a little more important.”

“But if the science is moving fast, parents of all walks of life can still fail to understand the importance of early learning — including Castelbuono herself, who said she had to be taught not to treat pre-K like a babysitting service.

“I was always pulling my kid out of pre-K, and here I am an educator!”

(continued on page 20)
Pre-K Results Are In!
An independent evaluation has found that Blueprint for Early Literacy has a positive impact on child outcomes. Children in Blueprint classrooms outpace their peers in vocabulary development by showing about two and a half months more growth.

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Pre-K Services (continued from page 18)

Castelbuono laughed. “And they were like, ‘No.’ That was really good for me.” Pre-K providers say that parents like Castelbuono are common. Among providers’ basic challenges is to get the message that pre-K work is not just day care, and that parents have a responsibility to treat it like school.

“It all starts with that first phone call,” said Matthews. “We emphasize that we need them to be involved, that you need to talk to your child every day, that you need to work with your child at home … if we say that we have a concern, we need them to follow up.”

Getting parents on board with the concept can take some effort, providers say.

A basic obstacle: parents don’t always know when their child is lagging developmentally. A child that plays happily at home may act out in ways that the parents never seen when challenged by the unfamiliar world of a pre-K classroom.

“Parents love their children more than anyone in the world, and they will overlook what we see as obvious. The famous line from a parent is, ‘He doesn’t do that at home,’” said Lisa Smith, director of the Amazing Kids Academy in North Philadelphia. “And if the parents don’t know, they don’t know how to correct it.”

But officials know that for families, the top priority for child care is not usually the academic rigor. Whether it’s day care, pre-K, or something in between, what parents value most are safety, affordability, convenience and reliability.

Anything less is a dealbreaker, officials say.

“They want quality. But they also want convenience. They need conve- nience,” said Castelbuono. “No one wants to be driving or riding a bus for a long time with a three-year-old. It’s a bigger challenge for the younger the child is.”

Cynthia Figueroa, just installed as leader of Mayor Jim Kenney’s newly created Office of Children and Families, echoes the point.

“When they come in and see how attentive the children are,” she said, “they think, ‘That’s our job.”’

Figueroa said. “They get to go back to the dinner table and say, ‘At Amazing Kids they do this and that’ … They observe everything. They talk to each other. Word of mouth is the best advertising in this community.”

City, District: expanding offerings, aligning services

To get more quality service to more young children, the challenge for City and District officials is twofold: first, to increase the availability of high-quality options, and second, to boost awareness and demand for the service.

“It’s a steep task that involves aligning several major programs that have different funding, eligibility restrictions, and reporting requirements,” said Figueroa. “In government, we’re very good at confusing people sometimes,” she said. “We’re trying to do is create some efficiency … We are at multiple tables, planning around vari- ous different [funding] streams.”

The City and District each run separate pre-K networks, and officials say that each is following separate strategies to build out their pre-K capacity.

The city’s PHLpreK program is expanding its soda tax-funded offerings. The city programs aim to serve about 3,300 children a year, currently using 138 providers. Among the Kenney administration’s pre-K priorities is to help improve low-rated centers in poor communities. Officials say they’ve helped 39 providers in “priority” communities improve from one or two Keystone Stars to the three- or four-star level.

Eligibility for the city’s programs is simple: any Philadelphia resident qualifies for free pre-K, regardless of income. A good sign for the city is that the 2019-20 cohort filled 96% of its funded slots, and served a demographically representa- tive group: 61% African American, 12% white, 5% Asian, and 20% multi-racial or “other.”

“We feel very good about the race and ethnicity breakdown,” said Figueroa. “It mirrors the census tracts.”

Meanwhile, the District’s pre-K is funded by a mix of state and federal dol- lars, including Head Start. The District serves more children than the city, but has more eligibility restrictions, and less capacity to boost provider quality. About 11,000 three- and four-year-olds get served in about 160 District-run sites, said Castelbuono, and 67 of those sites are in one of the city’s 150 elementary schools. The others are in “partner sites” that in- clude nonprofits and private providers.

In-school programs are currently staffed by District teachers, but Castelbuono said private providers could soon be working in District buildings.

“What I’m pushing for is [to] boost the number of pre-K kids in the school buildings without it actually being school operated,” she said. “You could take a provider and say, here’s your four classrooms, with your staff.”

City and District efforts are hard to coordinate, officials say, because report- ing and eligibility requirements are so different. But Figueroa and Castelbu- ono say the two sides are working to- gether to help “align” their efforts.

Figueroa, who was just hired this winter, said this collaboration between the city and District is just getting start- ed. Her office will be the point of contact between the Kenney administration and Superintendent William Hite’s team, she said, and she’s begun to schedule key meetings. But city officials don’t want to ask too much too quickly, she said.

“We’re very sensitive about how best to support them, because there’s so many different moving parts for them,” Figueroa said.

One form of collaboration is al- ready underway: the city’s health records turn out to be the best way for District officials to find children under six. For the past two years, District officials have used the city’s immunization database to send 30,000 letters annually to households with three-year-olds, in- form them about pre-K and kinder- garten registration.

That collaboration solved a very basic problem for the District, Castelbuono said. “We don’t know who’s out there! How would we know?” she said. “Everybody thinks it’s an easy problem to solve, but it’s not.”

But as it’s hard for the District to know where the younger children are, it’s hard for parents to find out exactly what the city and District can offer.

Currently, parents can visit the city PHLpreK website to find out what’s available for free. They can go to the District to find out what’s available with a subsidy through the state-run “PreK Counts” program. But no single place tells them everything. Castelbuono said that a priority is to develop a one-stop “portal” that connects parents to every- thing available, no matter what funds it.

“In this day and age we should be able to get there — we have the tech- nology,” she said. “It’s not going to be easy, it’s not going to be quick.”

In the meantime, providers end up being the first point of contact for par- ents. It’s there that families often find out what’s available and how much — if anything — it will cost.

“That’s our job,” said Sheila Bon- ner, a supervisor at Wonderspring.
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“All of us balance our budgets on the backs of teachers,” O’Brien said. “Revenue is insufficient from every source. We can’t change what it really costs.”

Caregivers for low-income families are not sufficient, but even charging private pay families $17,000 a year doesn’t fully cover costs, she said.

Ideally, there would be an integrated pre-K through 12th grade education system that aligned curriculum, she said. Right now, this isn’t happening in Pennsylvania. Even better would be a system that considered the crucial infant care component, since so much of development occurs in those years — not to mention the importance of quality care to families with infants and toddlers.

“The younger the child, the more important it is to offer expertise and services with robust oversight,” said Chris-tie Balka, who helped with the launch and development of PHLpreK. Such an ideal system would be “holistic” and attend to the health, social-emotional development, and cognitive needs of children. “It’s a public responsibility,” she said.

At the same time, putting such care under the aegis of the local school district is not necessarily the best approach it would “under-fund the system” into the school system, but this is not an option for Penn-sylvania, she said.

“We would have put local providers out of business. That was one of the challenges for the state at the same time knowing that what exists now is complex, confusing, and overly bureaucratic.

When Mayor Kenney made PHL-preK a centerpiece of his administration, he couldn’t put it in schools only or put it exclusively under School District jurisdiction. “We had a robust and qual-
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Por Connie Langland

En una soledad mañana sabatina, la bibliotecaria Christina Holmes se sentó y comenzó a leer para las mamás, papás y pequeños sentados a su alrededor en la Biblioteca Blackwell del Banco de Filadelfia, un bebé/niños pequeños de la Biblioteca Regional Lucien E. Blackwell en el oeste de Filadelfia.

“Sepáralas, júntalas, aplauda una y otra vez” decía Holmes mientras los pade ayudaan a los chiquitines a juntar y separar sus manos. “Sepáralas, juntalas, aplauda sin parar”.

El más pequeño del grupo tenía unos seis meses de edad, y el mayor, 2 años. Por 30 minutos, los niños escucharon rimas, sonidos y cuentos junto con el balbuceo y las conversaciones de los otros chiquitines y adultos a su alrededor.

El evento semanal, llamado Read, Baby, Read, Baby, (Lee, bebé, lee) es uno entre una amplia variedad de esfuerzos - tanto a pequeña como a grande escala - que componen la iniciativa conocida como Read by 4h.

Read, Baby, Read ya lleva dos años en dos bibliotecas de la ciudad, la Blackwell y la Richmond, y se está expandiendo a otros 10 lugares en los próximos tres años.

Otro programa respaldado por las bibliotecas, Literacy in Early Learning Spaces, que promueve las mejores prácticas de alfabetismo en centros de cuidado para niños, comenzó hace dos años en dos áreas de bajos recursos de Filadelfia. Luego se expandió a cuatro, y hay planes de estar en siete áreas de la ciudad el próximo año.

El ParentChild+, otro programa que capacita a los padres en sus hogares para promover el alfabetismo y el conocimiento de los números en niños pequeños, comenzó en el norte de Filadelfia, se expandió al oeste y al sur, y tiene planes de expandirse una vez más al sureste de Filadelfia.

Este enfoque en los primeros años de la niñez es intencional.

“Un 85% del desarrollo cognitivo ocurre en los primeros cinco años de la vida”, dijo Christine Caputo, jefe de servicios y programas para niños de la Free Library of Philadelphia.

Los programas Read, Baby, Read y Early Learning Spaces buscan promover el alfabetismo en la niñez temprana entre los padres y los cuidadores. La pregunta es, dice Caputo, “¿Cómo podemos preparar a los niños para tener éxito con todas esas destrezas de alfabetismo y desarrollo del lenguaje para que no empiecen el Kinder retrasados?”

La iniciativa de acercar especialistas en alfabetismo en la niñez temprana y proveedores de cuidado de niños en el estado se busca con diferentes métodos, desde simplemente ayudar a los niños a juntar los palitos, a la promoción de la alfabetización de los pequeños a través de programas nacionales como Read by 4h.

“Nuestros maestros se sienten cada vez más seguros de lo que están haciendo”, dijo Lansd Slager. “Estamos viendo que un 100% se matriculan en el cuarto grado, que se han demostrado en investigaciones que los estudiantes necesitan leer bien para hacer bien en los primeros grados de la escuela. Sin embargo, dos terceras partes de los estudiantes de cuarto grado y cuatro de cada cinco estudiantes de los otros grados no han demostrado en investigaciones que los estudiantes necesitan leer bien para hacer bien en los primeros grados de la escuela.”

Efecto en toda la familia

Mientras el programa Literacy in Early Learning Spaces de la Free Library busca capacitar a proveedores de cuidado, el programa ParentChild+ procura orientar a padres en sus propios hogares sobre cómo promover el alfabetismo y el conocimiento de los números en los niños más pequeños.

La iniciativa está en múltiples lugares de Filadelfia, y con el apoyo del GreenLight Fund, es parte de un programa nacional que ya lleva cuatro décadas y procura aumentar la preparación para la escuela, reducir la necesidad de educación especial, y mejorar las tasas de graduación con actividades de lectura y juego en el hogar para los niños más pequeños.

“Es una estrategia de dos generaciones”, dijo Omar Woodard, director ejecutivo de GreenLight. “Podemos lograr mucho con los niños, pero ellos existen en un contexto de familia. Nosotros creemos que mejoramos también las capacidades y posibilidades de los padres. No creemos que se trate de darle apoyo solamente a un integrante de la familia y que ese efecto llegue a los demás, sino que el apoyo se le brinde a la familia completa. Mejorar la interacción entre padres e hijos no es solo benéfico para un niño, es bueno para el resto de la familia también.”

El programa abrió hace cuatro años en asociación con la Autoridad de Vivienda de Filadelfia y la Corporación de la Mano de Salud Pública en la Biblioteca Blackwell de North Philly. Un segundo programa abrió en la comunidad Mantua, y hay otro preparándose para abrir en la comunidad Burram.

El especialista trabaja con cada familia durante dos años. “Estamos viendo mejores interacciones entre los padres y el hijo, estamos notando un aumento en el alfabetismo y conocimiento de los números, y estamos también viendo que un 100% se matricularon en el cuarto grado. En los últimos cuatro años esta ha sido una inversión increíblemente eficaz y transformadora”, dijo Woodard.

La organización sin fines de lucro The Art Sphere Inc. “usa arte y música, contemplación y movimiento” como un medio para promover el alfabetismo en sus programas escolares y de bibliotecas, y busca capacitar a los niños pequeños una serie al mes para ayudarles a desarrollar diversidad temática en sus lecturas, “haciendo que los niños se sientan más seguros de lo que están haciendo”, dijo Jenny Bogoveld.

Aparte del cuento, los Braxton tienen planes de ver libros relacionados con comida, colores y animales - “las cosas que él a él gustan ahora”, dijo ella.

Yahala Fisher y su hijo Semaj, de casi 1 año, han estado viendo a la hora del cuento “desde que él tenía tres meses”, dijo Fisher. Read, Baby, Read “le ayuda a aprender palabras nuevas, conocer gente nueva y desarrollar un interés por la lectura. Es lo que yo quiero”.

Y ese es el punto, dijo Naisha Patterson, de 15 meses de edad, escucha mientras Christina Holmes lee un cuento en la Biblioteca Regional Blackwell en Filadelfia.

Los proveedores reciben orientación sobre “alfabetismo y desarrollo de lenguaje” dos veces al mes y asisten a cuatro sesiones anuales de desarrollo profesional en la biblioteca local. “Nuestros maestros se sienten cada vez más seguros de lo que están haciendo”, dijo Lansd Slager. “Estamos viendo que un 100% se matriculan en el cuarto grado, que se han demostrado en investigaciones que los estudiantes necesitan leer bien para hacer bien en los primeros grados de la escuela.”

La campaña Read by 4th fue lanzada en Filadelfia en 2015 y tiene más de 100 colaboradores, entre ellos fundaciones, el Distrito Escolar, la Free Library y la ciudad, así como entidades sin fines de lucro, otras agencias gubernamentales, socios corporativos y voluntarios.

Entre las iniciativas actuales están construir bibliotecas en hogares y adiestrar maestros y padres, dijo Jenny Bogoveld, la directora ejecutiva de Read by 4h.

Filadelfia es parte de la Campaign for Grade Level Reading, una campaña nacional para fomentar la lectura a nivel de grado que respalda esfuerzos a nivel local, estatal y nacional a fin de crear conciencia sobre este tema. El grupo dice que se ha demostrado en investigaciones que los estudiantes necesitan leer bien para hacer bien en los primeros grados. “Sin embargo, dos terceras partes de los estudiantes de cuarto grado y cuatro de cada cinco estudiantes de los otros grados no han demostrado en investigaciones que los estudiantes necesitan leer bien para hacer bien en los primeros grados.”

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In the photo above, digital literacy teacher Emma Molyneux points to her display honoring famous black innovators, as well as African American staff and students at Juniata Park Academy. The students were nominated by their teachers, who wrote short blurbs celebrating them.

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For more information, go to: www2.gse.upenn.edu/slp or contact the program at 215-746-2718 or gse-slp@pobox.upenn.edu (Priscilla Dawson, Co-Director)

www2.gse.upenn.edu/slp

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Photo by Lynn Oseguera
Guide to High Schools to be published in May

The Notebook produces a print guide to Philadelphia’s public high schools — District and charter — each year to assist families in navigating the school selection process. This year, we will print this guide in May and distribute the copies to every public school and library in the city. Profiles of the high schools and information about the high school selection process also is published online at thenotebook.org.

If you are interested in supporting the production of the high school guide as a sponsor or advertiser, please email advertising manager Dara Galtman at darag@thenotebook.org.

Tickets on sale for Annual Celebration

Every June, 400 public school supporters gather in celebration at the end of the school year. This festive event features awards for outstanding high school journalism, talented local musicians, and the opportunity to speak with the most influential voices in the local education community.

This year, the Notebook’s annual event will honor the journalists who have made our 26 years of education journalism possible — the reporters who work tirelessly to shine a light on the truth and tell the stories of the teachers, parents and students in our public school system.

Join us from 4:30 to 7 p.m. on Tuesday, June 2, at the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia to celebrate “Education Journalists: Past, Present and Future.” Speakers will include Dale Mezzacappa, Notebook contributing editor and veteran education journalist and mentor to many talented reporters; and Elizabeth Green, CEO of Chalkbeat, a national nonprofit education news organization.

Tickets are on sale now at: http://weblink.donorperfect.com/notebookevent

For information on supporting the event as a sponsor or program book advertiser, please contact Lauren Wiley at laurenw@thenotebook.org.

SCHOOL CALENDAR 2019-2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3/10-3/12</td>
<td>Interim Reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/6-4/10</td>
<td>Spring Recess - Schools closed</td>
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<tr>
<td>4/15-4/17</td>
<td>Report Card Conferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/28</td>
<td>Pennsylvania Primary Election Day - Schools closed (Tentative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/13-5/15</td>
<td>Interim Reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/25</td>
<td>Memorial Day – Schools and Administrative Offices Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/10-6/12</td>
<td>Graduation Window</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/12</td>
<td>Last day for pupils</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/15</td>
<td>Last day for staff</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SHAPE THE FUTURE HERE AND BEYOND

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education.temple.edu/notebook

Seasonal Academic Calendar

04/24/2020, 05/22/2020
Professional development half-days - 3 hour early dismissal days

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- EdS in School Psychology
- MS in Creativity and Innovation
- MS in Education Administration with School Principal and Special Education Leadership certification
- MS in Education Improvement and Transformation
- MS in Learning Technologies
- MS in Mathematics, Learning, and Teaching
- MS in Special Education
- Dual MS in Special Education/Applied Behavior Analysis
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