

BACK TO SCHOOL

PPS Offers Transitional Program into Kindergarten

Outcomes show higher literacy and attendance rates

By *Melanie Sevckenko*
Of *The Skanner News*

Portland Public Schools is making strides in attendance rates and reading skills with a program it started as a pilot back in 2010.

Called Early Kindergarten Transition (EKT), the three-week summer program equips little ones with the skills they need to settle into kindergarten; from self-regulation and social-emotional behavior to building routines and getting familiar with their new school environment.

In addition, children learn how to work with other students, play safely outdoors and switch between activities.

"It's not rocket science, it's just a very supportive way of welcoming families to understand what school is all about, before school starts," said Nancy Hauth, program manager at PPS's Office of Early Learners.

Since EKT launched, the data has proved the benefits of being prepared, as kindergarten can be more rigorous than parents or kids assume.

"What we saw was the attendance and pre-literacy skills bumped up over their peers," said Hauth. "Attendance in kindergarten is really crucial for third-grade reading benchmarks and graduation rates."

Today, EKT has expanded to 13 schools, primarily in southeast Portland. Eventually, said Hauth, PPS would like to bring the program to all Title 1 schools in the district, meaning those with high percentages of children from low-income families.

So far, the program has zeroed in on schools with steep poverty rates, attendance issues, and a high number of kids who have special needs, or whose second language is English.

The program works to fill the gap for kids who have not had a structured preschool experience, or who don't qualify for PPS's Head Start program, which prioritizes children of families that meet federal poverty guidelines.

With a lack of preschools in the outer southeast region, Hauth told *The Skanner* that kids were often coming to kindergarten unprepared and struggling, which only added stress on their parents.

That's why EKT also offers a parent component to the curriculum. Twice per week during the



Amparo Garcia, kindergarten teacher at Rigler Elementary School, plays the ukulele during Early Kindergarten Transition program, summer 2017.

program, mothers and fathers can meet with teachers to better understand child development and how to support their kids during the school year. It's also a chance

“Any incoming kindergarten child could benefit from this kind of program

to connect with other parents to help build community around the students.

Boise-Eliot/Humboldt Elementary School — which struggled with attendance rates due to families living far out — is an example of how EKT works with culturally-specific agencies through Schools Uniting Neighborhoods (SUN). Each agency then tailors the EKT curriculum to meet the needs and demographics of its students and its families.

At Boise-Eliot/Humboldt, Self Enhancement Inc. (SEI) facilitates both afterschool programming as well as its EKT program; at Rigler and Scott elementary schools, it's the Latino Network.

"Any incoming kindergarten child could benefit from this kind of program," said Mary Merriweather, managing director of SEI at Boise-Eliot/Humboldt. "Every kindergartener, regardless of their social or economic status, has the same experience of taking the big step to being educated away from home and away from their parents."

Kaveh Pakseresht, assistant principal at Boise-Eliot/Humboldt, has already witnessed EKT's success since he started his position last

summer. "When the kids come in the first day of school, there are familiar faces for them to interact with, and they already know our building and our routines."

For children to participate in EKT, they must be five-years-old by Sept. 1 and plan to attend one of 13 EKT schools in the fall.

PPS's Office of Early Learners recommends that parents register their children for school by June 1, to ensure inclusion in outreach about programs like EKT.

Foster

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plete his associate's degree due to a combination of financial and emotional challenges.

Specifically, he said, his financial aid was suspended a couple of times during his community college years due to poor grades.

"I'm responsible for failing those classes, but a lot of youth go through college and don't have to work because you failed those classes," Markley said.

He also suspects he struggled academically in part because growing up in abusive environments lowered his expectations for himself. He's also the oldest in his family and his concern about his younger siblings took higher priority for setting goals for himself, he said.

"A lot of people assume that once you get to college

as a foster youth, the battle is won and that's just not the case," Markley said.

Feinics said some students also may need advice about navigating a bureaucratic system, or help with life skills, as well as emotional issues that may arise from past trauma.

McDonald said it took a long time to connect with others and to set down roots.

A 'fear of becoming vulnerable'

"Coming out of the foster care system, there's a fear of becoming vulnerable," McDonald told *The Skanner*.

Fostering Success provides a point of contact for assistance, but also allows students who've experienced foster care to meet others with similar experiences. Many foster care advocates are young, Feinics said, and students often tell her she's the first former foster youth they've met over the age of 35.

McDonald said Fostering Success has allowed him to connect with other students to help them get a sense of what's possible. McDonald, who is Black, also said he works directly with former foster youth of color to help them navigate college life.

"For students of color, we already have a different navigation path and for students coming out of foster care, that's complicated," McDonald said.

Markley has been a vocal advocate for foster youth at the state and national level, testifying for a Foster Youth Bill of Rights in May 2013 and a Foster Sibling Bill of Rights in May. He connected with those opportunities through Foster Club, a national nonprofit based in Seaside that holds conferences for current and former foster youth and connects them with opportunities for advocacy.

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School News Briefs

Champions Barbering Institute Holds Back-to-School Cut-a-Thon

Champions Barbering Institute, Inc., will hold a back-to-school cut-a-thon, offering free haircuts and styles for all students, as well as school supply giveaways, food and fun, from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Aug. 29 at Champions Barbering Institute at 424 NE Killingsworth. To make an appointment, call (503) 477-5616 or visit www.cbi.life.

Celebrate Reading at the North Portland Library's Children's Book Fair

The 19th annual North Portland Children's Book Fair: Do the Right Thing and Read! will take place from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. Aug. 26 at 512 N. Killingsworth St. Join us on the back lawn of the library as we celebrate literacy with free activities, music and dance performances you don't want to miss. Every child or teen in attendance will get a free book to take home.

Performances:

1 p.m. - Hip Hop Soulsation

3 p.m. - Chata Addy & Shi Dah Discover the Rhythms of Ghana

Balloon twisting with Batman and Wonder Woman

Face painting by Mystique

Arts and crafts tables

Button and book making

This event is free and open to the public. For more information, call Multnomah County Library at (503) 988-5123.



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