

Focus on Education

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"What a great thing!" Those were the words of an anxious couple I met at Farmin Stidwell Elementary on a recent Saturday morning. Judging by the faces in the crowd, they were not alone in this nervousness. However, their anxiety was tempered by the great opportunity to learn best techniques to teach and work with their two-year-old well before she enters kindergarten.

The anxiety quickly faded when Tracy Gibson, point person for the Ready! 4 Kindergarten program, reminded all parents they are heroes to their children and they are in fact, their most important teacher. It is Gibson's, Panhandle Alliance for Education's, and the Lake Pend Oreille School District's hope that parents will take up that challenge and learn best teaching practices by participating in these classes. On this recent Saturday, the room was packed. It is clear the message is getting out to parents that beyond instructional techniques and knowledge, this class offers to participants free learning tools and games to make their home teaching more effective.

The program is patterned after the successful model from Kennewick, Washington. It is a community-focused program, targeting children ages birth to five. The goal is provide parents information regarding educationally relevant child development milestones, skills for teaching children developmentally appropriate pre-academic skills, and educational materials and activities that ensure a rich, early learning environment. The program's model is based on research documenting the benefits of family based programs and the importance of adult-child shared reading and purposeful play.

The new program was launched by Panhandle Alliance for Education in October of 2008 in response to the number of students entering kindergarten without some basic skills. District records demonstrated that almost 45 percent of kindergartens were entering school without basic kindergarten readiness skills. With so many children struggling with kindergarten-aged tasks, the school district worked to research a program that could help families better prepare their children for their first step into formalized schooling. They wanted a program that demonstrated results. The Ready! 4 Kindergarten program emerged as one of the very best.

Ready! has developed targets for each age level of pre-kindergarten learning. The age level

targets are the skills identified by research as having the highest correlation to success in school, specifically learning to read and do math early and well. The target skill sets are broken down by age to help parents guide their children toward goals that are attainable for their level of development.

The Ready! Program schedule is one 90-minute class every fall, winter and spring. There are three different lessons for each of the five age groups (birth to 1, 1-2, 2-3, 3-4, and 4-5 years). Classes in the earliest age group start with the most basic skills for children during their first year of life and ramp up form year to year with increasing sophistication. A trained teacher leads the lesson. About 80 percent of the class time is allocated to hands-on training activities, 15 percent explains research and child development, and 5 percent ties the tools and activities to the targets.

This program is an excellent example of the private-public partnership the district is looking to explore. This program would not happen without the generous donations from the Panhandle Alliance for Education, the CHaFE bicycle event, bike riding and fund raising extraordinaire Mel Dick, teachers from the Lake Pend Oreille School District, and the inspired leadership of Tracy Gibson.

Most importantly, we are thankful that so many young families have taken advantage of this great opportunity.

For more information on how you and your children might be involved, please telephone the Panhandle Alliance for Education at 208-263-7040.

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