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EDUCATION

READY OR NOT

What does it mean to be ready for kindergarten?



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

The Florida Department of Education revamped the way kindergarten readiness is tested last year. Because of those changes, Escambia County appears to have made a nearly 24-point leap in readiness in two years — from 66 percent in 2014 to nearly 90 percent for 2016, based on preliminary data released to VPK providers.

SHANNON NICKINSON
 FOR THE NEWS JOURNAL

What does it mean to be ready for kindergarten? Most teachers agree on the basics: That a child can name at least seven colors; that a child knows the alphabet and the sounds that each letter makes; she can recognize and write her name; a child can share, take turns, follow directions and has the self-control to sit still for at least 10 minutes at a stretch.

But when it comes to measuring how many children are ready for school, in Florida, the answer is murky — and ultimately too many children are left in the dark.

The Florida Department of Education revamped the way kindergarten readiness is tested last year. Because of those changes, Escambia County appears to have made a nearly 24-point leap in readiness in two years — from 66 percent in 2014 to nearly 90 percent for 2016, based on preliminary data released to VPK providers.

Florida lawmakers last week directed the

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Viewpoint: We need to get serious about early learning. **13F**

Is your child ready for kindergarten? What they should know first. **4,5A**

Dr. Dana Suskind pushes for increased interaction with children. **7A**



Dr. Dana Suskind is the founder of the Thirty Million Words Initiative at the University of Chicago.

Educator asks parents to embrace power

SHANNON NICKINSON
 FOR THE NEWS JOURNAL

Dr. Dana Suskind wants parents to embrace their power.

And she wants to help communities understand why investing in those parents — and their children before age 4 — is critical to the future.

"A community that takes this on can't expect that this will happen in one election cycle," Suskind says. "Changes don't occur in a two-four year period, but they do occur."

Suskind is the founder and director of the Thirty Million Words initiative, a research program at the University of Chicago Medicine that studies the effect of early language exposure on children under 3.

Her message on the importance of investing in children and parents early is one she is eager to share with Pensacola educators, parents, childcare providers and business and community leaders on March 30, all of whom must understand the link between strong early education

See Power, Page 7A

ELECTION 2016



TONY GIBERSON/TGIBERSON@PNJ.COM

Presidential candidate Marco Rubio speaks at the Palafox Wharf in Pensacola Saturday night.

Rubio vows to not give up

Promises to rebuild military, repeal Obamacare at local rally

THOMAS ST. MYER
 TSTMAYER@PNJ.COM

A crowd of about 250 supporters heard a tamer Marco Rubio at his Pensacola rally Saturday night, nearly 12 hours after he condemned Republican presidential front-runner Donald Trump for inciting supporters to physically harm protesters.

Trump postponed a rally Friday night in Chicago after violent scuffles between supporters and protesters.

"I think we also have to look at the rhetoric coming from the front-runner in the presidential campaign," Rubio said at the Saturday morning press conference in Largo. "This is a man at rallies who has told his supporters to basically beat up the people in the crowd and he'll pay their legal fees."

Rubio took only a few shots at Trump during his Pensacola rally. His speech lasted about 30 minutes in front of a crowd that filled the Palafox Wharf to the brim. A select few individuals sat in seats, but the overwhelming majority stood shoulder-to-shoulder, some carrying Rubio signs, after waiting in the rain for the doors to open at 6 p.m. The Rubio campaign moved the venue from the originally scheduled Fish House because of inclement weather.

The Florida senator primarily criticized President Barack Obama in his speech and to a lesser degree

See Rubio, Page 2A



Find videos of Marco Rubio's stump speech at

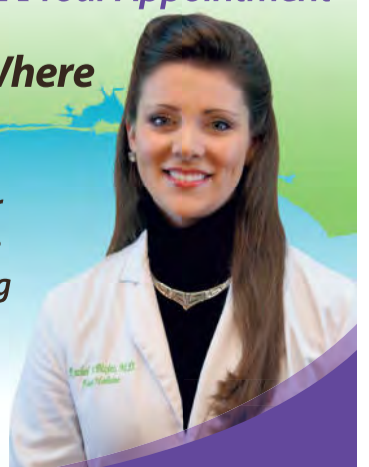
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PJ-0000377730

You are your child's best teacher

Kindergarten is more work than it used to be, which means it's never too early to start preparing your baby for being ready for school. Nearly 85 percent of a child's brain development occurs before the age of 4, that means moms, dads,

grandparents and caregivers are a young child's best resource for being ready. And when your child is 5 and close to starting kindergarten, this guide can be a checkup to help you see if he's ready to make the grade for school.

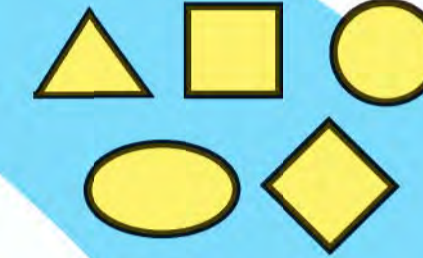


Keetsa McKeithen reads to her 3-year-old class at T.R. Jackson Pre-K center in Milton. Photo by Michael Spooneybarger.

MARK THE ONES YOUR CHILD KNOWS

- ___ First name
- ___ Age
- ___ City they live in
- ___ Last name
- ___ Boy or girl
- ___ Telephone number

NAME THESE SHAPES



Can your child?

PRINT THEIR NAME

FOLLOW THREE DIRECTIONS GIVEN AT THE SAME TIME

1. Hang up your backpack.
2. Put your lunch bag on the shelf.
3. Sit on the rug for circle time.

TELL YOU WHICH IS THE SMALLEST CIRCLE



FOLLOW BASIC RULES?

- Sharing and taking turns.
- Respecting people's property.
- Cleaning up after themselves.

COPY THESE SHAPES



IN THIS AREA

Is your child ready?

What your child should know and do before entering kindergarten



Latisha Phillips reads to her son, Kellen Phillips, 3, during the ECARE family night at Global Learning Academy in Pensacola. Photo by Michael Spooneybarger.

"Jane hides her shoes for Maria to find."



REPEAT SIMPLE SENTENCES BACK TO YOU WITHOUT MISTAKES

■ Identify opposites such as big/little, hot/cold, front/back, left/right, happy/sad.

■ Dress himself without help, except for snaps, buttons and zippers.



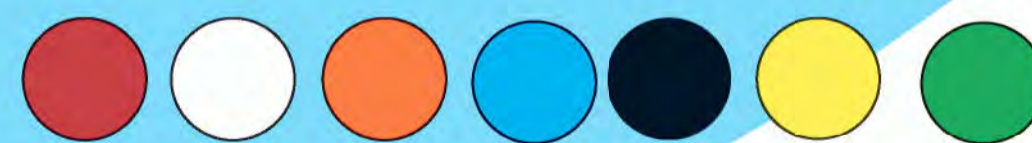
■ Listen for 10 minutes without interrupting.

■ Identify the front cover, back cover and title page of a book.

READ COMMON WORDS

the	my
of	is
to	are
you	do
she	does

NAME THESE COLORS



COPY THESE LETTERS

V H T C A

READ AND WRITE THESE NUMBERS

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

1. TRACE THIS LINE

2. CUT THE LINE WITH SCISSORS



PARENT GUIDE

A parent is the most powerful teacher a child will have.

So how can you help your baby grow into a 5-year-old who is ready for school and eager to learn?

■ Talk to your child, even before they can answer you back with words. Your baby's brain is like a sponge and every word they hear you say is food for it to grow. The more words a baby hears, the better prepared for learning they will be.

■ Sing, even if you don't have a pitch-perfect voice. Singing introduces the ideas of rhyme and poetry, which help build vocabulary.

■ Read to your child every day for at least 20 minutes.

■ Play with your child. Play with toys, crayons, blocks and things that inspire creativity. Play outside to build their bodies and minds by talking about nature and the world around them.

■ Ask questions, even before they are old enough to answer.

■ Help your child learn letter names by pointing them out on familiar items or signs. When driving and you see a STOP sign, say, "Look, that sign says S-T-O-P. It says for me to stop."

■ Look for letters on signs in the neighborhood. When you see the WALMART or MCDONALD'S sign, comment on the letter at the beginning of the sign. Ask your child to say the letter and what sound it makes.

■ At the grocery store, have your child find his or her favorite drink or cereal. For example, "You like Cheerios. Look for the box with a C on it." Point to the word Cheerios on the box and say the letters in the word.

■ Use Cheerios or Fruit Loops to have your child spell his or her name, and the names of friends or family. Use them to count, too. For example, "Your pile of Cheerios has 10 in it. My pile has five. Your pile has more than my pile."

■ Use the public library. Find books that have letters and pictures of things that begin with letters.

■ Make an ABC book. Let your child find letters in newspapers, magazines, cereal boxes, snack wrappers, or fast food bag and cut them out. Use a notebook and let your child glue each cut-out letter on its own page. When you find pictures of things or words that begin with that letter, add them to the letter page.



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NEWS

Changing the rules for readiness

The rules keep changing for how kindergarten readiness is measured in Florida. Here is an at-a-glance look at changes over the years:

1997-1999: Each of Florida's 67 counties uses its own system to evaluate preschool programs and measure kindergartners' readiness. There is no statewide standard for kindergarten readiness assessment.

1999-2002: State law creates a screening checklist to test kindergartners on 17 metrics to gauge readiness.

2003-2006: The state creates the School Readiness Uniform Screening System to "provide objective data regarding" the 17 items. Two assessments are selected through a request for proposal: the Early Screening Inventory - Kindergarten, a developmental screening given to individual students; and one of two observational instruments — either the Work Sampling System or the Ready-for-School Behavioral Screener. In 2004-2005, the two observational instruments are discontinued and the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) is added.

2006-2009: Florida becomes one of the first states in the country to offer free, Voluntary Prekindergarten for all 4-year-olds regardless of family income. The law required school districts to test children for readiness in the first 30 days of school. The Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener (FLKRS) is designated for this, but FLKRS itself isn't a test. It is an acronym for whatever testing instrument that's been designated as the screening test.

FLKRS has two parts — a social and developmental piece, Early Childhood Observation System (ECHOS); and the first two measures of DIBELS—letter naming fluency and initial sound fluency, which are used to gauge literacy skills.

2010-2014: DIBELS is replaced with Kindergarten Florida Assessment for Instruction in Reading (FAIR-K). In 2013, the Office of Early Learning merges with the Department of Education, after operating as a separate department in the state education hierarchy. In 2014, FAIR goes from two parts to six parts: alphabets, (phonological awareness, letter sounds); oral language (vocabulary pairs and following directions); comprehension (listening comprehension and sentence comprehension).

The test becomes an all-electronic format, but technical glitches, the need for classroom substitutes to cover while the teachers did the evaluation and other issues with the system leads the state to discontinue FAIR.

The Florida Education Department decides that only the Work Sampling System — the test that leans heavily toward social, emotional and physical development — would be used to measure readiness.

2015: Work Sampling is again used to measure readiness. School districts may choose to use another test to gauge the math, language and literacy skills not covered on Work Sampling.

2016: Florida lawmakers instructs the Office of Early Learning not to issue readiness rates for the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school years. Questions arose about the validity of the data given the issues with administering the FLKRS.

Source: Florida Office of Early Learning in the Department of Education.

Ready

Continued from Page 1A

Office of Early Learning not to release readiness data for the second consecutive year. That leaves providers classified as low performing across the state and in Escambia County status quo for another year.

"The state has a lot of difficulty with kindergarten readiness tests," says Escambia School Superintendent Malcolm Thomas. "Last year they had to stop it in the middle of testing because of problems with the system."

This year they're only doing the observational part with the teacher.

"I think that's a flaw," Thomas says. "It's not going to give you good data for the early literacy piece. They may be able to walk a balance beam, but that vocabulary, that sound-symbol relationship, unless you measure that, you're just guessing at readiness."

The most recent available data show nearly 1,000 of Escambia County's 3,000 kindergartners were not ready for school.

However, the way "kindergarten readiness" is measured has changed several times in the 10 years since free preschool for every 4-year-old became law.

The Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener (FLKRS) is the umbrella term for a series of tests that have been used to measure whether 5-year-olds are ready for school.

The tests also have been changed multiple times.

From 2010 to 2014, the screening test had two parts: Florida Assessments for Instruction in Reading (FAIR) and Work Sampling System given in the first 30 days of the school year by kindergarten teachers.

Starting in 2014, FAIR had six parts: phonological awareness and letter sounds; vocabulary pairs and following directions; and listening comprehension and sentence comprehension.

Work Sampling is portfolio-based and includes an observation by the teacher, samples of a child's work, and physical, social and emotional developmental markers.

Children can be scored "not yet," "in process" or "proficient."

In 2014, school districts across the state reported problems with FAIR, which went to an electronic format. Students and teachers had to wear headphones to do the test together, which meant districts had to pay for substitutes to cover the classroom during testing.

Some districts reported problems accessing the system to upload the data, and ultimately the state dropped FAIR and no readiness rates were released that school year.

Work Sampling, the observational test, was used this year to measure readiness and the effectiveness of Escambia County's 85 prekindergarten programs.

The issue drew criticism from people like Dave Lawrence Jr., former publisher of the Miami Herald and now chairman of the Children's Movement of Florida.

Lawrence was part of the team that helped establish Florida's VPK program in 2006.

"This year readiness rates are headed toward being calculated with very incomplete data," Lawrence wrote to supporters in an email sent late last month. "Should those rates become final, most of the 1,200 low-performing providers will be removed from probation. That means no accountability tied to early reading skills or for the public investment of hundreds of millions of dollars.

That's lousy public policy."

Now that they won't be used, Bruce Watson, director of the Escambia County Early Learning Coalition, says providers who have improved from probationary status may not get credit for their work.

But issuing rates based on data with "uncertain reliability was probably well-founded," he says.

"This why I think this action on the part of our legislature can simultaneously be seen as a good and bad thing," Watson says. "However, I am not sure doing nothing would have been any better. Only time will tell if this will improve our system."

Watson says the coalition has 10 VPK providers still under contract from the group that were placed on probation from the 2012-2013 school year. All of them came off probation based on the recently released unofficial readiness rates. They will now have to be told they are going to be on probation after all, and therefore they still have to meet the requirements of their provider improvement plan from 2013-2014.

For the past two years the No. 1 reason the coalition has terminated a VPK provider's contract is failure to meet the provision of its provider improvement plan. In each case this also results in a provider having its eligibility to provide VPK services revoked for five years.

Using our own tool

Superintendent Thomas said his kindergarten teachers used Discovery Education, an assessment that measures language arts and math skills in the first nine weeks of the school year.

Discovery Ed is scored on a 1 to 4 scale.

Level 3 would be at expected level; level 4 above expectation; level 2 would be students approaching expectations; level 1 are children who are significantly below expectations.

The School District's Discovery Education tests says 62 percent of children were near expectations or above in reading and math at the start of school,

and 38 percent were significantly behind.

The state's Work Sampling shows that nearly 90 percent of the same children were ready for school.

So which test should be the best measurement?

"We don't trust either one," says Thomas. Discovery Education does provide good information, "but it's not the kind of test that will be able to do what we used to do."

Escambia's kindergarten teachers will use the Discovery Education tool again near the end of the school year to see how much progress students have made.

Rodney MacKinnon, director of the Florida Office of Early Learning, which oversees the state VPK program, acknowledges the disconnect.

"One of the quirks statewide is that there are 67 school districts and they each use their own tool, too, so there's a wide variety of tools in place" to measure readiness, McKinnon says.

Tara Huls is the head of voluntary prekindergarten program and policy in the Office of Early Learning. She says we are in the second year of a three-year contract to use Work Sampling for readiness.


Whether that contract continues is for the Department of Education to decide.

"I concur that the ideal process would be to use a slightly different version of the same tool for VPK pre-assessment, post-assessment and the kindergarten screener, but because of various statutes and the independence of school districts, we're sort of locked into the process we have now," McKinnon says. "We are working toward improving it, but there are a lot of moving parts involved in this."

That leaves some school districts at a loss.

"For a district that wants to use data to improve their progress, you have to use your own data that you have to create," Thomas says. "But that isn't comparable statewide or nationally."

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NEWS

EARLY EDUCATION

Educator pushes increased interaction

SHANNON NICKINSON
FOR THE NEWS JOURNAL

In her book, Dr. Dana Suskind advocates the three T's — Tune In, Talk More and Take Turns.

Tune In

» It means as the adult, pay attention to what your child is interested in at the moment. The part of a young child's brain that allows them to switch focus is not fully developed. They will focus on only what they are interested in, even if that interest only lasts for five minutes.

» If they are stacking blocks, don't make them quit stacking blocks to listen to a story. Stack blocks with them and while you're there, talk about the blocks — their color, how many, which ones are shaped like rectangles or squares, etc.

» Digital distractions — smartphones and tablets — are not in the picture.

» It means using child-directed speech — changing the tone and pitch of your voice to the singsong rhythm that

appeals to young ears and brains. Repetition is key. You will get tired of reading the same story long before your child will get tired of hearing it. Keep reading it anyway.

» It means responding warmly when a newborn cries. Studies show that newborns whose cries are left unattended suffer "toxic" stress. If that continues over time, it damages the child's brain and makes it harder for that child to learn, trust others and control his or her emotions.

Talk More

» It means more than just the number of words. It's the kind of words and how they are said.

» It means narrating what you're doing, even if your child is too young to respond. When you change a diaper, when you wash the dishes, when you do anything, talk about it to your child.

» It means using parallel talk — commenting on what your child is doing. "You found my purse! What's in it?"



A mom and daughter, who participate in Dr. Dana Suskind's Thirty Million Word Initiative at the University of Chicago, use a LENA, a device that records how many words a child hears.

Keys. Hear how they jingle? Isn't that loud. No, we don't put keys in our mouth.

They are dirty. We only put yummy things in our mouth like milk or bananas. Keys are for opening the door. See?"

» Between the ages of 3 and 5, children start to use language to talk about things they don't see right at that moment — about a toy they've played with before or a place they've seen.

» It means extending the phrases they start to say into full sentences. When your child says "Uppie, uppie," you should respond, "Do you want daddy to pick you up? I would love to pick you up and carry you on my shoulders!"

Take Turns

» It means responding to your child in conversation even before she has real words. When your baby makes a sound, it's her way of trying to talk to you. Answer back, even if you feel silly doing it.

» As your child ages, ask "how" or "why" questions about things. It forces your child to start building problem-solving skills.

Power

Continued from Page 1A

and a well-prepared workforce.

"If you care about your community, if you care about this country, (early education) is the biggest return on investment I can give to you all," Suskind says.

Escambia Superintendent Malcolm Thomas said it is important to have Suskind speak in Pensacola.

"That research is the key," Thomas says. "All academic tasks are connected; they all have a language basis. That's how we explain things. You can't explain how to add without words."

As a pediatric surgeon and professor at the University of Chicago, Suskind found what she saw among her patients who received cochlear implants mirrored findings in a study by the University of Kansas team. The studies discovered a language gap existed between children of different socioeconomic levels — that poor children heard 30 million fewer words than the upper-class children.

That gap made them likely to be weaker readers who started school at a disadvantage, a spot that sadly many are likely to stay in throughout school.

That led to her book, "Thirty Million Words: Building a Child's Brain." Now impacting the learning environment for all children in ages 0 to 3 is her passion.

A surgeon's journey

Suskind is one of the leading voices in the field.

Thirty Million Words was named partner in a \$19 million study funded by PNC, a Pittsburgh-based banking company, through its Grow Up Great initiative. Suskind was invited to the White House to participate in a summit called by President Barack Obama to discuss the importance of early education.

Ten years ago, Suskind started the cochlear implant program at University of Chicago — a place she calls "an island in a sea of poverty" on Chicago's South Side.

All of her patients had the same potential to acquire language after their surgery. But many didn't.

Suskind noticed that difference fell along socioeconomic lines — children from poor families didn't acquire language as quickly or as well as children from better-off families.

What began as an effort to improve outcomes for her patients grew into a deeper mission.

"I began to understand the profound impact of those first few years of life, which led me to Hart and Risley," Suskind says.

It brought her to the 30 million-word gap.

'Building different brains'

Betty Hart and Todd Risley were researchers at the University of Kansas who wondered why the high-quality, immersive preschool program they set up wasn't helping young children as much as they thought it would.

They spent 2 1/2 years tracking 42 families with young children in Kansas City and found the difference came down to income and words.

Their research documented the "achievement gap" — that poor children hear, by age 3, 30 million fewer words than their more well-off peers.

Why does it matter if those children start school behind?

Children who enter kindergarten behind often are still behind by third grade, when experts and educators say the focus of school shifts from learning to read to reading to learn.

Children who don't have those basics are more likely to struggle throughout school, when reading comprehension, critical thinking and putting new knowledge into context will be what they need to move on to the next level.

"I came to realize the language is the catalyst for all children's brain growth," Suskind said. "It's the most powerful resource in the world."

Suskind took the name for her program from the "big headline" from the Hart and Risley study, but closing that gap is about more than just increasing the number of words a young child hears.

"It's about the richness of interaction between parent and child," she said. "The first three years has a really special role in a child's development."

The technical term is brain plasticity. It means that the human brain is never more pliable, more easily and profoundly influenced, than it is in those first three years.

Suskind and her team also were influenced by the "growth mindset" — a body of research influenced by Professor Carol Dweck and others.

That's the idea that intelligence is not fixed at birth. Parents can, with the right tools, make their babies smarter.

Once parents understand that they can help make their babies smarter by taking to them, Suskind says parents in her project stepped up to the challenge.

"It's about building different brains," she says. "We must find ways to empower, in those first three years, parents and caregivers. I take a public health view of this."

Education and health during this period of time are deeply intertwined, Suskind says.

"We need a lens that looks like (K12) education, where we work with childcare workers (on strategies to make classroom-based time strong), but also we need the public health way of meeting families where they are. This is where the difference is."

It's why she says the conversation about early education needs to start much earlier than kindergarten — or even prekindergarten.

"We need to think about that in the early childhood space as conception to kindergarten," she says. "It has to get into the groundwater, from maternity wards to cultural institutions."

Helping children in need

At Thirty Million Words, the interventions are multilayered. Moms in the project range in age from 19 to 41. They get 12 home visits in a six-month period and follow-up assessments for up to 3 1/2 years. The goal is to have all the data in by 2019.

The home visits from research assistants at TMW are the centerpiece of the effort. In those visits, the children have a recorder clipped to their clothes.

That device — Language Environment Analysis (LENA) system — is a word pedometer that records up to 16

hours of audio. The file is collected weekly and uploaded to a computer, where the number of words said can be analyzed.

The results are shared with parents, along with strategies to help them talk more with their children in ways that will support their development.

It creates an important loop of feedback, and it puts parents at the center of the effort.

"The narrative is, 'you're more powerful than you ever imagined.' That's the difference," Suskind says. "Talk doesn't happen in the vacuum. If families don't have the wrap-around support, I mean, to say that being poor is difficult is an understatement."

TMW also touches all new parents at Northwestern University and the University of Chicago hospitals.

While the baby is getting a hearing screening, parents are shown an animated video about the importance of words and language in building a baby's brain.

There are efforts with a lighter touch, too.

Suskind also is working with the Chicago Public Library and Chicago Chil-

dren's Museum to launch exhibitions, and in 2016, video segments for a Netflix series produced by the Jim Henson Co. are scheduled to air.

"It's about the cultural shift where we become a nation that understands how important this space is and how important parents are," she says.

Suskind ends her book with a deeply personal note. Her husband, Don Liu, drown in 2013 while trying to save children who were struggling in rough water on Lake Michigan.

Suskind and their three children witnessed the drowning.

In the book's epilogue Suskind writes that her husband didn't hesitate to go into the turbulent waters to save children who needed help.

"And for me, I included him both so he could continue on this journey as well as to, really — he's sort of a metaphor for what we need to be thinking about in this country," she told the Freakonomics podcast in November 2015. "That every child in this country is our own, and we should want for them what we want for our own children."

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OPINION

Get serious about early learning



Randy Hammer

VIEWPOINT

The stain has been with us from the beginning. When Gov. Jeb Bush announced the first-year results of Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, there were only two failing schools in the state. Both in Escambia County. The plights of A.A. Dixon and Spencer Bibbs elementary schools were played out on front pages and TV screens across the state. Everybody and their cousin had ideas about how to fix these F schools and public education. If you listened to state legislators, the fix sounded simple. You first rewarded teachers at A schools with bonuses, because this would encourage teachers at F schools to work harder so they, too, could get bonuses. Next you weeded out the bad teachers, because they obviously were the yoke that dragged down the low-achieving F schools. And then you offered parents vouchers — cash — to yank their children out of the F school so they could place them in private schools.

The reason we were doing this as a state was because Jeb Bush had won the governor's race in 1998 by promising to reform public education. Florida had one of the worst high-school graduation rates in the nation. Too many businesses were taking their jobs to other states because Florida didn't have the educated workforce that companies needed. But here's what stood out to me back in 1999, the first year of FCAT:
 » Dixon and Spencer Bibbs had the worst economic demographics of any schools in the state.
 » Of the 134 elementary schools in Florida in which at least 90 percent of the students qualified for free or reduced-price meals, 126 received a D grade and two received an F. Only six earned a C grade or higher.
 » In Escambia County, the 10 elementary schools with the poorest student populations were rated a D or F by the state.
 Yet nobody wanted to address this. "Poverty is not an excuse," was Gov. Bush's response.
 Now, here's what stood out to me in 2014, the year Florida abandoned the FCAT — 10 of 11 elementary schools in Escambia County with the poorest student populations were rated a D or an F. The lone school to score higher, the Global Learning Academy, earned a C.

Poverty may not be an excuse, but it certainly seems to play a role in school and student performance. The real lesson of FCAT is this: Too many children from poverty-stricken areas show up for their first day of school two and three years behind students who live in more affluent districts. Jim May, who was Escambia County's school superintendent in 1999, said the problem at Dixon and Spencer Bibbs was that students started school so ill-prepared that the children spent their first few years in elementary school playing catchup. The real problem, he said, happened before children even showed up for kindergarten and first grade. What was true in 1999 is still true today. In Escambia County, just 66 percent of students show up for school kindergarten ready. The other 34 percent don't know their colors, how to hold a crayon or spell their name. On pages 4-5A you see what it means for a child to be kindergarten ready. For the past several months, the Studer Community Institute has been working with the Pensacola News Journal to produce a report on early learning. Over the next three Sundays we will

be reporting on a multitude of local, state and national initiatives designed to help children show up for their first day of school ready to learn. If we want to get serious about education, then we as a community and state must get serious about early learning. FCAT did not fix public education and did not fix Florida's high school graduation rate. When new numbers released last year for the 2012-2013 school year, just seven of 50 states had a worse high school graduation rate than Florida. Despite paying a British company \$250 million to administer FCAT between 2009 and 2013, it seems more and more obvious that standardized testing is not the answer. Early learning? Perhaps. It's a key reason that Quint and Rishy Studer have pledged \$50,000 for the best ideas to improve kindergarten readiness in Escambia County. By helping parents help their children show up for kindergarten ready to learn, we raise children's odds of graduating from high school on time. If we're serious about fixing public education, that is the best place to shine a spotlight. Hammer is president of the Studer Community Institute.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

'Super Gumbo'

Jazz enthusiasts experienced a special jazz treat on Monday, Feb. 15 when twin reedmen Will and Peter Anderson and guitarist Alex Wintz performed for the Jazz Society's "Super Gumbo" at Seville Quarter. This New York-based trio played jazz standards which thrilled the audience. Their tour has now ended and the arts section of today's New York Times notes their appearance in a NYC club this week. Thanks to Seville Quarter which has hosted the Jazz Gumbo event for 20 years and to the News Journal for their help in reaching our interested public. Funds raised at this event will go toward the free 33rd Pensacola Jazz-Fest to be held in Seville Square April 1-3. We invite you to help us celebrate jazz — America's unique musical art-form. New at JazzFest will be a student jazz competition Friday night. Previously this event was held separately

and we're pleased to include it in Jazz-Fest this year. As before, there will be a mix of performers — high school and college bands, regional and national jazz artists. Thanks to our business sponsors and jazz patrons for helping us produce our annual jazz gift to the larger Pensacola community.
 — F. Norman Vickers, Pensacola

Traffic question

Here's a question: How is it possible that the loudest, most obnoxious cars and motorcycles in this town roar up the ramp from Chase Street onto Interstate-110 at all hours of the night, and the Pensacola Police Department never seems to notice? They often run in packs — I've seen as many as 11 or 12 cars and/or motorcycles at a time. I've been told that PPD won't enforce any noise ordinance until after 10 p.m. But this goes on into the wee hours most weekends.

Most interesting of all: After they mount the ramp and are on I-110 proper, they roar past the roof of PPD headquarters on Hayne Street. I mean within 50 feet! By then I'm guessing some of them are doing 80 mph or more. I can't believe that someone inside that building does not hear all that racket. Or perhaps an officer in the parking lot, getting into their cruiser. Same bunch can often be seen and heard cruising Palafox on a Saturday afternoon — rumbling along in their nasty little toys, cracking the accelerator now and then just to hear the reverberation off the buildings. So ... I'm just asking.
 — Jim McDade, Pensacola

Grossly unfair

I urge all retired military veterans that are receiving less than 50 percent VA disability compensation to contact U.S. Rep. Jeff Miller and thank him for cosponsoring HR303, the Restored Military Pay Act.

Also, I urge you to call the House Speaker, Paul Ryan, and urge him to support HR303, and ask the committee to move it to the speaker to get voted on. This bill is long overdue. We are paying for our own VA disabilities because the same amount we receive from the VA is deducted from our retired military paychecks each month. We only get the VA amount tax-free and this is a giant ripoff. This bill has been introduced and reintroduced many times. So far, it only has 94 cosponsors, a shame in a House with more than 400 members who claim they support veterans. I have contacted all presidential candidates on this issue and have not received any response. It is time that all retired military disabled veterans finally get compensated justly, regardless of the percent of disability rating. The present law is grossly unfair and HR 303 needs to be passed and signed into law. There have been far too many delays.
 — Raymond Wood, Pace

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EARLY EDUCATION » PART 2

Educational quagmire

Head Start tries to overcome transportation, facility woes to help kids



PHOTOS BY TONY GIBERSON/TGIBERSON@PNJ.COM
Teacher's aide Alicia McCullough looks on as a group of children work on individual projects at the Head Start program at Lincoln Park Primary School.

THOMAS ST. MYER
TSTMYER@PNJ.COM

Colorful butterflies, lady bugs and other artwork cover the classroom walls as preschool students scurry about from one activity station to the next, polishing off their next hang-up worthy creations. The preschoolers put their pencils and crayons down for recess, and 20 minutes later they return to the classroom, sit down on the alphabet rug and attentively listen to teacher Sandra Bolling read a "Henny Penny" book.

Head Start classroom settings such as this one mirror those of countless private-pay preschools, yet there is a stigma attached to the school readiness program, which is free for low-income families.

"I don't know why it's put down so (much). It is a great program," says Bolling, who is in her 24th year with Head Start. "The children learn from Head Start. Everybody thinks just because it is low income the children are not learning. The children learn very well, and you have excellent teachers."

The outer appearance of Head Start facilities perhaps contributes to its perception problem. Bolling teaches children in one of three unattractive white portables located inside a chain-link fence next to Lincoln Park Primary, and that location is a beat compared to some other Community Action Program Committee Head Start sites. Three of the programs operate in public housing facilities


See Head Start, Page 6A



TONY GIBERSON/TGIBERSON@PNJ.COM
Head Start teacher Sandra Bolling and student Adrianna Bailey use primary colors to make a butterfly.

An early learning primer to VPK in Escambia County. **5A**

Executive Editor Lisa Nellesen-Lara shares her head start experiences. **7F**

 Sandra Bolling reads to her Head Start class and kids participate in recess. pnj.com

VPK providers face funding, testing challenges

SHANNON NICKINSON
FOR THE NEWS JOURNAL

Belinda Churchill gets a lot of mileage out of a pizza.

Math skills come from making a table and ranking everyone's favorite topping. Self-control and listening skills come with an exercise in making individual English muffin pizzas for a snack.

The artistic piece comes in the homework assignment to decorate your own pizza slice however you like. Fine motor skills and shape identification are also part of the lesson for the children in Churchill's voluntary prekindergarten class at St. Christopher's Children's Center at the namesake Episcopal Church in Pensacola. She and co-teacher Lisa Corman work to document those skills and more with notes, observation, photos and video.

That effort is put into a program called Teaching Strategies Gold, a tool required this year by the Florida Department of Education's Office of Early Learning to help track academic and social progress of 4-year-olds in the state's VPK system.

See VPK, Page 7A

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ESCAMBIA

Scott holds fate of Studer project

WILL ISERN
WISERN@PNJ.COM

A tax incentive crucial to the development of a downtown apartment complex that has been in question now awaits only Gov. Rick Scott's signature to be codified into law.

A bill passed by the Florida Legislature in the final hours of this year's legislative session will, if signed by the governor, grandfather Economic Development Ad Valorem Tax Exemptions, or EDATEs, which were previously approved under a state program that expired with the New Year.

The bill, HB 7099, was introduced by Rep. Matt Gaetz (R - Fort Walton Beach)

and is largely aimed at extending or creating certain sales taxes, but it also included the provision on EDATEs. The bill was passed with broad support in both legislative chambers.

"It looks like it's a go," said Escambia County Property Appraiser Chris Jones.

Quint Studer has said the EDATEs approved last year by the Escambia County Board of Commissioners and Pensacola City Council are vital to his plans for developing a 250-unit apartment complex at the former site of The News Journal.

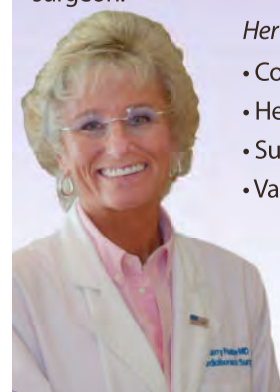
The tax breaks would allow for construction of a necessary parking garage. Without the EDATEs, the expense of build-

See EDATE, Page 2A

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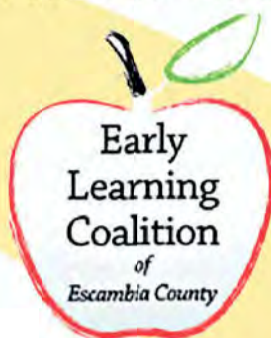
The best care for the heart comes from the heart.

An early learning primer

Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten in Escambia County



VPK
The Florida Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten program, VPK, is 10 years old and was one of the first of its kind in the nation.



Funding is tied to enrollment

If a Coalition goes over its base funding because enrollment goes up, the state boosts its grant, and likewise reduces it if it goes under.

\$5.4 million

Escambia County's share for the current school year, including administration costs.

85 VPK providers

In Escambia County, the majority of children attend VPK at private centers, including charter schools, public schools, church-based centers, and childcare centers. You can view the list of 85 VPK providers at Studeri.org.

2,080 children

Number of 4-year-olds who are enrolled in VPK in Escambia County this school year.

500 children

Attend a school district run VPK. All of those are based at schools that serve low-income neighborhoods. A child must live in a school's attendance zone.

About \$2,437 per child

VPK provides funding for about a half-day of instruction time free to every 4-year-old.

Financial gatekeepers

Early Learning Coalitions are the financial gatekeepers of the program and monitor the contracts with local VPK providers. The per child base funding rate is unchanged for 2016-2017.

VPK is not all day long

Centers may offer care only for the hours that the state VPK funding covers, or may offer care for the rest of the day — an expense the parent would have to pay. Parents must provide transportation to and from the center.



There are 12 Gold Seal VPK providers in Escambia County



What does the Gold Seal mean?

In 1996, the Florida Legislature set up the Gold Seal Quality Care program to acknowledge childcare facilities that are accredited by nationally recognized agencies. Those standards reflect quality in the level of care and supervision provided to children. There are 15 agencies whose accreditation the state accepts for the Gold Seal program.

Providers who earn it can get a bump of up to 20 percent in funding from the Early Learning Coalition through the School Readiness Program. Childcare centers must seek the designation on their own and pay for the costs associated with obtaining it.



Emily Ellis, a VPK teacher at Lincoln Park Primary School, reads to her class. The school's VPK scored a 100 readiness rate in 2013.

Gold Seal provider names	Addresses	Readiness rate as of 2013
1 Beulah's Pre K Learning Center Inc.	1505 W. Avery Street	76
2 Blue Angel Early Learning	10271 Sorrento Road	90
3 Childcare Network Creighton #112	4079 Creighton Road	N/A
4 Gateway Christian Preschool VPK	245 Brent Lane	95
5 Jamison Street Preschool	20 Jamison Street	100
6 La Petite Pickwood	9601 Pickwood Drive	78
7 Lighthouse Private Christian Academy 1	901 E. Gadsden Street	Fewer Than 4 Children Screened
8 Myrtle Grove Baptist Preschool Learning	5920 Lillian Highway	71
9 Sand Castle Academy	4000 N. Palafox Street	60
10 Treehouse Learning Center	3912 Barrancas Avenue	80
11 Trinity Learning Center VPK	3400 Bayou Boulevard	88
12 Wee Kare Academy	2901 N. 12th Avenue	100

Why do readiness scores matter?

Kindergarten readiness scores — as determined by a child's performance on the Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener — are used by the Early Learning Coalition to rate effectiveness of VPK providers.

Because of changes to the test, 2013 was the last year that readiness scores were given to VPK providers — nearly three years ago.

A provider who scores 70 percent or lower is considered a Low-Performing Provider.

If a provider's readiness score is below 70 for two years in a row, it becomes a Provider on Probation. The provider then has up to three years to implement an improvement plan. If it doesn't improve, it loses its eligibility to provide VPK services for five years.

Of the providers from 2013 still under contract with the Early Learning Coalition, 10 were on probation. Bruce Watson of the Early Learning Coalition says all of them would have been off probation had the preliminary rates for this year been accepted.

Some caveats to the readiness rates

■ The test is done in the first 30 days of school by a teacher who is just getting to know the child. That teacher may not know the improvements the child has made in VPK. Most VPKs make a portfolio on a child. There is no consistent, formal mechanism to give it to the public school teacher who inherits that child.

■ School districts don't share the data across county lines. For example, a child who lives in Pace but who attended a VPK in Escambia County because his or her parents work in Escambia County, will be tested for kindergarten readiness in Santa Rosa — and will count toward that county's readiness rate.

■ Summer learning loss, which all kids experience, can impact performance on a test.

■ Children who go to private school after VPK are not tested and do not show up in a provider's readiness rate.

What's your VPK provider's readiness score?

You can check the list of Escambia County's 85 providers at our website:

Studer.org



Learn what it takes to build a child's brain

Dr. Dana Suskind will share her research on the critical importance of early language exposure for a child's development. The event is free and brought to you by the Studer Foundation. Registration is encouraged due to limited seating.

WHEN: Wednesday, March 30. Doors open and parking at 3:20 p.m. Workshop begins at 3:45 p.m. - 4:45 p.m.

WHERE: Booker T. Washington High School, 6000 College Pkwy.

TO REGISTER, VISIT: Studeri.org



Mission

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RESEARCH : Shannon Nickinson / snickinson@studer.org
GRAPHIC DESIGN : Ron Stallcup / rstallcup@studer.org

NEWS

Head Start

Continued from Page 1A

at Gonzalez, Moreno and Morris courts, and Head Start offers classes in its headquarters at worn down Gibson Elementary School. Escambia County School District leases the old elementary to CAPC annually for a mere \$1.

CAPC Executive Director Douglas Brown cites the outer conditions of facilities as a significant hurdle to overcome. Head Start is federally funded to serve 935 students from birth to age 5 in a county where Brown says nearly 3,500 students qualify for their services, and yet the federally-funded program failed to fill 96 slots this school year. That total actually drops under 50 when taking into account kids dual enrolled in Escambia County School District Title I and Head Start programs, but that still leaves a significant number of unfilled spots.

"The question becomes if you were to ride by our facility on Cervantes and C Street you would look at a school building and you'd say, 'I guess that's OK, but do I want my kid to go there?'" Brown says. "And I guess my point to that is when you're dealing with folks who are coming from either households or communities or both with deficits and you're saying you're trying to give these kids a head start, I can tell you we're doing that, but I can tell you we'd be doing better if we provided them an aesthetic that the private-pay market would say, I want to go there, too.

"I think there's a psychic happening that takes places when you go into something that you know is secondary or hand-me down sort of speak and you're asking folks to again overcome those deficits, and they are, but I'd also say that you're giving the impression that you really don't care, and that's not to say people don't care, but it's to say, I'll say it this way, that that is good enough."

Enough bang for federal buck?

Brown wonders what happens to the 2,500 or so students who qualify for Head Start or Early Head Start yet never wind up at any of its 16 center-based facilities, its six locations in collaboration with Title I or its one Child Care Network location. He says parents potentially spend limited income on daycare without the federally-funded educational benefits offered by Head Start.

Research by Studer Institute indicated about one-third of children in the county entered kindergarten unprepared two years ago based on state evaluations. That total shot up into the 90th percentile this year after the Florida Department of Education revamped testing, but Judy Dickinson, CAPC director of education, says the former test is probably a better indicator of the kids properly prepared for kindergarten.

Head Start uses Teaching Strategies GOLD three times a school year as its testing metric. The comprehensive curriculum requires observing how kids interact in their natural environment along with identifying letters, numbers, colors and shapes. Head Start prioritizes education, health, nutrition and parent involvement services as opposed to standard Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten programs that focus primarily on the education component.

"We're teaching social skills and cognitive skills,"

Bolling says. "We're here for the whole child."

Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center reports Head Start served about 1 million kids and pregnant women in 2014 and that totaled nearly \$7.8 billion in federal grants.

A 2013 audit of CAPC reveals the nonprofit corporation received about \$7.15 million for its 935-slot Head Start program. CAPC Head Start expenditures totaled \$7.4 million. Salaries and benefits eat up about \$4.5 million.

The Head Start program in Santa Rosa County serves 280 kids — 40 of whom participate in Early Head Start. Dawn Alt, Santa Rosa County preschool director, says the Head Start program fills to capacity every year. Its 2011 audit reveals the program received about \$2.3 million in federal grants and its expenditures nearly matched.

House Speaker Paul Ryan (R-WI) among other prominent politicians question funding a program that they say fails to properly prepare kids for school. Administrative History of the Office of Economic Opportunity reports students who complete the program and then attend a disadvantaged school lose gains made by second grade.

Ask Head Start parents and they disagree. Parents say the program pays immediate dividends and puts their kids on path to long-term success.

Tiffany LaQua enrolled her two daughters, 5-year-old La'Niyah Bryant-Johnson and 3-year-old Ka'Miyah Johnson, in the Santa Rosa Head Start and Early Head Start programs. She credits the Head Start environment for Ka'Miyah learning to control her anger and socialize with other kids, and she says La'Niyah is benefiting from speech therapy arranged by its staff.

"I think every parent wants a better life for their children," LaQua says. "One of the reasons to enroll your children in Early Head Start and Head Start is for that positive introduction to education and that early intervention."

Why families bypass Head Start in favor of private preschools or daycare facilities puzzles LaQua. She says Head Start prepares kids socially and intellectually for the transition to kindergarten and offers other valuable family services such as a GED program for parents.

The inability to fill every slot in Escambia County troubles Brown, but that only touches on the problems CAPC deals with in serving low-income families. A pressing concern is the shortage of facilities in low-income areas.

"We're unable to serve all of the children because we do not have additional space in those particular parts of town," CAPC Vice Chairperson Debra Little says. "We are looking at our location now to see what are the possibilities of finding another location say out in Ferry Pass or Ensley or Warrington to be able to serve those children, because there seems to be the greatest need in those areas."

The Early Head Start population (birth to age 3) is drastically underserved in both counties. CAPC accepts only 80 children annually for its Escambia program. Early Head Start cuts off the number of students per classroom at eight, and with limited facility space, that leaves CAPC few options.

"Early Head Start is the greatest need that we have," says Judy Dickinson, CAPC director of education. "We don't have enough slots to serve the birth to 3 population."



TONY GIBERSON/TGIBERSON@PNJ.COM
Sandra Bolling reads to a group of children at Lincoln Park Primary School. Bolling has been a Head Start teacher for 24 years.

Hitchhiking to Head Start

Bus transportation is nearly as problematic as facilities. The CAPC fleet is old and prone to breakdowns. The number of operational buses (14) falls far short of the ideal number (20).

Transportation is a pivotal piece to the Head Start puzzle. Brown says a significant number of parents start their workday before Head Start facilities open at 7:45 a.m. Those parents drop their kids off at daycare centers and depend on Head Start to transport their children.

"When our buses are down that means we have to scramble and get kids from that daycare center, because that parent would have to pay for a day of care from that provider if we don't go get them," Brown says. "For us, it's a struggle that we couldn't go get them from their home so we're trying to figure out, poorly, how we can go get them even when we still have a bus down, because that parent has a commitment and we have a commitment to that parent to get that kid to school."

"I can look at it this way. If I'm a parent who works, our agency is going to do everything in our power to get your kid from that daycare center to us. If you're a parent who doesn't work, your kid's at home and you're questioning why my kid is left at home because I'm underemployed or not employed."

Concerns over transportation extend into the kitchen. Head Start feeds kids twice daily and transports food to its Escambia County School District sites with old and sometimes unreliable vans bought at auctions.

Significant staff turnover, particularly among teachers and pediatricians, is another issue. Brown says neither University of West Florida nor Pensacola State College offer early childhood degree programs. That means CAPC recruits outside the area for Head Start teachers, and its pay scale pales in comparison to what school districts pays their VPK teachers. Brown says the salary gap between his agency and Escambia School District is in the \$12,000 to \$14,000 range.

Financial constraints frustrate Brown and his staff, yet they persevere in an effort to serve low-income families and prepare children for school.

"We're getting the job done," Brown says, "but we could do so much more with more support."

Holy Week and Easter Services

We invite you to join us as we celebrate the Passion and Resurrection of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

THE BASILICA OF ST. MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL
19 NORTH PALAFOX ST., PENSACOLA
Holy Thursday: 7 p.m.
Good Friday: 7 p.m.
Easter Vigil: 7 p.m.
Easter Sunday: 9 a.m. and 11 a.m.

CATHEDRAL OF THE SACRED HEART
1212 MORENO ST., PENSACOLA
Holy Thursday: 6 p.m.
Good Friday: 3 p.m.
Easter Vigil: 7:30 p.m.
Easter Sunday: 8 a.m. and 11 a.m.

CATHOLIC CHURCH OF THE HOLY SPIRIT
10650 GULF BEACH HWY., PENSACOLA
Holy Thursday: 7 p.m.
Good Friday: 3 p.m.
Easter Vigil: 8:30 p.m.
Easter Sunday: 8 a.m., 9:30 a.m. and 11 a.m.

LITTLE FLOWER CATHOLIC CHURCH
6495 LILLIAN HWY., PENSACOLA
Holy Thursday: 7 p.m.
Good Friday: 7 p.m.
Easter Vigil: 7 p.m.
Easter Sunday: 8:30 a.m., 10:30 a.m. and 7 p.m.

NATIVITY OF OUR LORD CATHOLIC CHURCH
9945 HILLVIEW RD., PENSACOLA
Holy Thursday: 7 p.m.
Good Friday: 7 p.m.
Easter Vigil: 7 p.m.
Easter Sunday: 7 a.m., 9 a.m. and 11 a.m.

OUR LADY OF THE ASSUMPTION CATHOLIC CHURCH
920 VIA DE LUNA, PENSACOLA BEACH
Easter Sunday: 8 a.m. and 9:45 a.m.

OUR LADY QUEEN OF MARTYRS CATHOLIC CHURCH
3295 OLDE BARRANCAS AVE., PENSACOLA
Holy Thursday: 6 p.m.
Good Friday: 6 p.m.
Easter Vigil: 8 p.m.
Easter Sunday: 10 a.m.

ST. ANN CATHOLIC CHURCH
100 DANIEL DR., GULF BREEZE
Holy Thursday: 6:30 p.m.
Good Friday: 6:30 p.m.
Easter Vigil: 7 p.m.
Easter Sunday: 8:15 a.m. and 11 a.m.

ST. ANNE CATHOLIC CHURCH
5200 SAUFLEY FIELD RD., PENSACOLA
Holy Thursday: 6 p.m.
Good Friday: 3 p.m.
Easter Vigil: 7:30 p.m.
Easter Sunday: 6:30 a.m., 8:30 a.m. and 11 a.m.

ST. ANTHONY OF PADUA CATHOLIC CHURCH
1804 NORTH DAVIS AVE., PENSACOLA
Easter Sunday: 8:30 a.m.

ST. ELIZABETH OF HUNGARY CATHOLIC CHURCH
3015 ST. ELIZABETH ST., MOLINO
Easter Sunday: 8:30 a.m.

ST. JOHN THE EVANGELIST CATHOLIC CHURCH
303 SOUTH NAVY BLVD., PENSACOLA
Holy Thursday: 7 p.m.
Good Friday: 7 p.m.
Easter Vigil: 7 p.m.
Easter Sunday: 8 a.m., 10 a.m. and 12:20 p.m. (Spanish)

ST. JUDE THADDEUS CATHOLIC CHURCH
303 ROCKY AVE., CANTONMENT
Holy Thursday: 6:30 p.m.
Good Friday: 6:30 p.m.
Easter Vigil: 8 p.m.
Easter Sunday: 10:30 a.m.

ST. MARY CATHOLIC CHURCH
401 VAN PELT LN., PENSACOLA
Holy Thursday: 7 p.m.
Good Friday: 3 p.m.
Easter Vigil: 8 p.m.
Easter Sunday: 8 a.m. and 11 a.m.

ST. PAUL CATHOLIC CHURCH
3131 HYDE PARK RD., PENSACOLA
Holy Thursday: 7 p.m.
Good Friday: 3 p.m.
Easter Vigil: 8:30 p.m.
Easter Sunday: 7 a.m., 9 a.m., 11 a.m. and 6 p.m.

ST. ROSE OF LIMA CATHOLIC CHURCH
6451 PARK AVE., MILTON
Good Friday: 3 p.m.
Easter Vigil: 7 p.m.
Easter Sunday: 8 a.m., 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. (Spanish)

ST. STEPHEN CATHOLIC CHURCH
900 WEST GARDEN ST., PENSACOLA
Holy Thursday: 6 p.m.
Good Friday: 3 p.m.
Easter Vigil: 7:30 p.m.
Easter Sunday: 7:30 a.m. and 10:30 a.m.

ST. SYLVESTER CATHOLIC CHURCH
6464 GULF BREEZE PKWY., GULF BREEZE
Holy Thursday: 7 p.m.
Good Friday: 7 p.m.
Easter Vigil: 7 p.m.
Easter Sunday: 9 a.m., 11 a.m., and 5 p.m. (Spanish)

ST. THOMAS MORE CATHOLIC CHURCH
3295 OLDE BARRANCAS AVE., PENSACOLA
Holy Thursday: 6 p.m.
Good Friday: 6 p.m.
Easter Vigil: 8 p.m.
Easter Sunday: 8 a.m. and 10 a.m.



THE DIOCESE OF
PENSACOLA-TALLAHASSEE

NEWS

VPK

Continued from Page 1A

"I'm real proud of my staff," says Allison Sanchez, director of St. Christopher's Children's Center. "It's helped bring more attention to the standards, which have always been there, and made everyone really look at them and make sure we're meeting them."

But Teaching Strategies Gold's future faces uncertainty. On March 9, the Office of Early Learning notified providers that lawmakers struck \$2.4 million from the budget meant to pay for Teaching Strategies Gold.

What remains is a test given at the beginning and near the end of the VPK year that focuses more on early math and language arts skills, without the social and developmental parts that Teaching Strategies Gold included.

That test touches four areas: print knowledge, phonological awareness, mathematics and oral language/vocabulary. Providers have used that data to spot areas where a child may be weak and address them before the end of the VPK school year.

Bruce Watson, executive director of the Escambia Early Learning Coalition, the financial gatekeeper agency that oversees VPK providers locally, said Teaching Strategies Gold was a good tool.

"Besides being a very good comprehensive evaluation of each child, the processes it requires to do the observations are also designed to increase the awareness of the teachers of their influence and the role they play in the child's education and development, which in turns helps make them better teachers," Watson says.

Watson says taking out Teaching Strategies Gold came with a give and take that removed a proposed increase in VPK funding, as well as the funding for the assessments.

The money, he says, instead went to the K-12 program.

"The fact that the money went to K-12 also speaks to the disregard many have for the importance of early learning and VPK in particular," Watson says.

'A disaster'

Change has come early and often to preschool providers in Florida. Funding to implement those changes has not always followed, some say.

"Since VPK has begun, every couple of years there's been a change in how assessments were done," says Tara Huls, who leads VPK program and policy in the Florida Department of Education's Office of Early Learning. "This isn't the first time we've had such a change."

All of that change has created a vacuum of information on VPK providers, who rely on the results of kindergarten readiness tests for their own readiness rates.

Those rates essentially haven't been updated since 2013, thanks to problems with the way the Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener (FLKRS) has been administered.

From 2010 to 2014, the screening test had two parts: Florida Assessments for Instruction in Reading (FAIR) and Work Sampling System given in the first 30 days of the school year by kindergarten teachers.

Starting in 2014, FAIR had six parts: phonological awareness and letter sounds; vocabulary pairs and following directions; and listening comprehension and sentence comprehension.

Work Sampling is portfolio-based and includes an observation by the teacher, samples of a child's work, and physical, social and emotional developmental markers.

In 2014, school districts across the state reported problems with FAIR, which went to an electronic format. FAIR was dropped and won't return.

Alix Miller, a Department of Education spokeswoman, said the contract for the Work Sampling test is through 2016-17 with two optional years: 2017-18 and 2018-19. FAIR at the kindergarten level will not be resurrected.

Presumably that leaves open the possibility of the same criticisms that dogged the Work Sampling only readiness results to arise again next year.

Providers used Teaching Strategies Gold are to evaluate each of their children three times a year on 38 points in a child's development, including math and language arts milestones (counting with blocks, recognizing numbers and letters, sight word development), social and emotional development milestones.

It requires preschool teachers to enter daily observations and documentation of each child's progress on those milestones.

Some providers reported problems with the system, including Dawn Alt, former principal of Oriole Beach Elementary School. She now is in charge of T.R.



RON STALLCUP / SPECIAL TO THE NEWS JOURNAL

Listening to and following directions for an activity is one of the many school readiness skills that VPK teachers work on at St. Christopher's Children's Center in Pensacola.

Jackson PreK Center in Milton.

"It has been a disaster. I know you won't believe this, but it is not as disastrous for us as it is for (other centers)," Alt says. "We have gotten substitutes for our VPK teachers so that they can enter in all that data."

Alt's frustration included the inability to see the reports the system is supposed to generate that show what her teachers have input into the system.

Sharrell Ethridge, education and assessment specialist at T.R. Jackson, generated those reports on her own, outside of the Teaching Strategies Gold system. Teachers use the reports to see where their children need more help.

"It's double the work," Alt says. "We could not pull what they had put in, so they had to do it again."

"This is not just something that we don't use," Alt says. "We want to use it. We are trying to get these children ready for kindergarten."

The cost for quality

As the state demands more from VPK providers, it hasn't offered them any more money for the added work.

The state's reimbursement rate for VPK for 2016-17 is \$2,437 per child, a figure that is unchanged from this year. The Base Student Allocation is less today than in 2007 in real dollars, says Escambia's Watson.

Access to quality care is an issue as well.

"A lot of state dollars have always focused on 3s and 4s, they forget about infants and 2s," says Brenda Hardy, director of Wee Kare Academy in Pensacola. "All of our training is geared toward older children, but they're like sponges even as infants. They need to be talked to and stimulated even then."

Hardy's center on 12th Avenue has 120 children.

"There just isn't enough childcare in this area," Hardy says. "We are licensed for 130, and I've turned away enough children in the last two months to fill this building up again."

It also isn't cheap.

According to the Pensacola Metro Dashboard, the cost of childcare can consume on average 49 percent of the median income of a single-parent household in Escambia County; in Santa Rosa, the figure is 30 percent.

According to the Florida Department of Children and Families, which licenses centers, there are 200 licensed childcare centers in Escambia County; 85 of those are authorized as providers of the state's voluntary prekindergarten program.

Of the 200 centers, 19 are Gold Seal Quality Care programs. That's a designation the Florida Legislature has established to acknowledge childcare facilities and family day care homes that are accredited by nationally recognized agencies in the field.

One of the agencies is the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Trinity Learning

The cost of child care

According to the market rate report for childcare providers for 2015 from the Florida Office of Early Learning:

Average monthly cost at Gold Seal Centers

Infant: \$641
Toddler: \$541
Preschool: \$611

Average monthly cost at non-Gold Seal Centers

Infants: \$577
Toddler: \$506
Preschool: \$460

Center, affiliated with Trinity Presbyterian Church on Bayou Boulevard in Pensacola, is one of three centers in Escambia County that have NAEYC accreditation.

The process is time-intensive and costly, but it is something Trinity's director Anna Kay Shirah believes is important.

The center has renewed its accreditation three times, most recently in February 2016 for a five-year term.

"For me, NAEYC is the best accreditation, and because we are faith-based, I want to do my very best for God and to do my very best for our children," Shirah says.

The accreditation process cost about \$1,400 the first time, Shirah says, and was at least \$1,000 the second time. NAEYC also requires centers to file annual reports that cost \$650 every year between accreditation.

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SPORTS, 1C, 6-7C ALL-AREA AWARDS HIGHLIGHT BEST IN WINTER SPORTS

EARLY EDUCATION » PART 3

EDUCATIONAL BRIGHT SPOTS

Lincoln Park Primary is a beacon of light in the shadows of poverty



Emily Ellis, VPK teacher at Lincoln Park Primary School, leads a discussion of "Chicka Chicka Boom Boom." In 2013, the school scored a 100 kindergarten readiness rate.

PHOTOS BY RON STALLCUP / SPECIAL TO THE NEWS JOURNAL

REGGIE DOGAN
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS JOURNAL

Cassandra Smith is a self-described workaholic.

That's how she approached her life, her career and the small school she runs in Pensacola.

In her third year as principal at Lincoln Park Primary School, Smith has been at the helm of a turnaround that has made the school a beacon of light in the shadows of poverty, conflicting and confusing state rating systems, and low funding.

Four years ago the school faced closure by the Escambia County School District because of falling attendance and failing academics. The district shuffled the fourth- and fifth-graders to other schools and brought in new leadership and staff.

With just under 200 students from preschool through third grade, Lincoln Park has risen from an F in 2013 to an A this school year, based on the state's rating system.

Another, and no less significant achievement, was the school's efforts to get children

See Educational, Page 8A



Lincoln Park Primary School Principal Cassandra Smith's hands-on approach helped in improving the school's F under the state's grading system to an A.

Coming Monday EARLY EDUCATION » PART 4

ECARE's Reading Pals help to improve preschoolers' literacy skills, while Florida State University researches how we learn.

Parent readiness is important, too

SHANNON NICKINSON
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS JOURNAL

Winning the school readiness battle begins way before kindergarten.

At T.R. Jackson PreK Center in Milton, it goes on every day.

And sometimes it is won \$250 at a time.

Dawn Alt, director of pre-K programs for Santa Rosa Schools, is the former principal of Oriole Beach Elementary School, a high-poverty school in south Santa Rosa County.

There are 280 students at T.R. Jackson, which also serves families and young children through Head Start and Early Head Start. Both are federal programs that aim to reduce the impact of poverty on families with young children through early education and family training and support.

In the annual survey done by Head Start

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FLORIDA LAWS

Gov. Rick Scott approves 111 proposals from abortion clinic funds to vessel fees

JIM TURNER
THE NEWS SERVICE OF FLORIDA

TALLAHASSEE — It may have been a quiet, post-session week in the Capitol, but the rest of the state wasn't exactly slumbering at the start of spring.

State wildlife officials announced that Florida black bears, which were prolific enough to be hunted last year, continue to have a "robust" population. But no word yet on a 2016 hunt.

It wouldn't be Florida without a fix of redistricting-related news involving the courts.

A three-judge panel of the 1st District

Court of Appeal unanimously rejected the request for legal fees from a coalition of voting-rights organizations in their mostly otherwise-successful battle over congressional districts.

Congresswoman Corrine Brown's fight against her redrawn District 5, stretched across Northeast Florida to Tallahassee, went before a federal three-judge panel in Tallahassee on Friday.

And Gov. Rick Scott drew a few headlines Thursday by pushing Florida as a travel destination while he criticized President Barack Obama for not abandoning an

See Proposals, Page 6A

Sacred Heart Hospital Pensacola has been named one of the

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PJA-0000377741

NEWS



Keetsa McKeithen reads to her class of 3-year-olds at T.R. Jackson Pre-K Center in Milton.

MICHAEL SPOONEYBARGER / SPECIAL TO THE NEWS JOURNAL

Santa Rosa Head Start by the numbers

For the 2015-2016 school year, 129 Head Start students went to a Santa Rosa School District kindergarten classroom. Sharrell Ethridge, staff member at T.R. Jackson PreK Center in Milton, made it her mission to find out what she could do about how they fared on the Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener, which evaluates a child's school readiness in the first 30 days of kindergarten. She found data for 118 of them. The children were evaluated in five categories: social and emotional development, literacy and language, math, science, and physical development. They can score proficient, in progress, not yet, or no score. The scores were:

Social/emotional development
 Proficient: 53 percent
 In Progress: 45 percent
 Not yet: 1 percent
 No score: 1 percent

Language/literacy
 Proficient: 43 percent
 In Progress: 53 percent
 Not yet: 3 percent
 No score: 1 percent

Math
 Proficient: 32 percent
 In Progress: 59 percent
 Not yet: 4 percent
 No score: 5 percent

Science
 Proficient: 31 percent
 In Progress: 56 percent
 Not yet: 6 percent
 No score: 7 percent

Physical development
 Proficient: 76 percent
 In Progress: 23 percent
 Not yet: 0 percent
 No score: 1 percent

Parent

Continued from Page 1A

families, the T.R. Jackson staff found that adults in 54 of those families didn't finish high school.

That led Alt and her staff to ask Santa Rosa Adult School to set up a GED class at T.R. Jackson. Officials hesitated because a GED class already is offered at the Berryhill Administrative Complex office building a half-mile away.

Alt knew parents wouldn't travel the extra half-mile because of psychological and practical barriers.

"I said it has to be here," Alt says. Getting the class set up at T.R. Jackson, the Susan Street complex, where parents already go, was just step one.

To enroll in a GED class required a \$20 fee for a placement test to gauge skills and \$30 a semester fee for the course.

"So now you're asking these families to come up with \$50 up front," she said.

Some couldn't afford it, so the staff started a scholarship fund. No full scholarships were given — everyone had to pay something toward the fee — but they

covered tuition for the eight parents who enrolled the first semester.

"If we can get eight, I'm OK with that," Alt says.

Head Start families must compete and stick to a plan that includes family goals and academic goals for the child. Having mom or dad complete her or his GED as a family goal allows the two parent advocates on staff at T.R. Jackson to do reminder calls and visits that include the nudge to parents to keep with their own studies.

When the second semester rolled around, only two parents returned.

Out went the calls and in came the results — the \$30 course fee was too much for some families to pay.

The scholarship fund was revived and with \$250 the class was back in business.

Staff member Sharrell Ethridge says aside from the obvious educational benefits of finishing high school, the T.R. Jackson parents are learning more.

"They learn to be able to ask, to advocate for their child — and themselves," she says.

Alt's goal for next year is to be able to offer childcare to her GED-seeking parents during class time.

"I know I can get eight more if we had

childcare," Alt says.

But it's only eight parents. Is that really making a dent?

Lee Bott, one of the parent advocates at T.R. Jackson, has an answer.

"The sleeper result is, 54 of our adults in our children's homes didn't have a high school education," Bott says. "Eight of them, today, are working toward getting that high school education. There are about eight more that when circumstances change in the next 12 months, they're going to start working on their education."

"When their kid gets old enough to

drop out of school, they're going to be able to say, 'don't do it. I did it. It's not a good idea' and they're going to be able to back it up with, 'I went back.'

"We had a mother just back at Christmastime come in to visit one of our Early Head Start teachers who didn't have a high school education when she started here with her first child years ago. She just got her (associate's degree) and has improved her life, so now, you're talking about a child who was born into poverty and is going to graduate from high school potentially out of poverty."

When you put it that way, it sounds like more than enough.

Pediatric

Continued from Page 3A

The process is on a fast track because the city and county review processes are running while the land deal negotiations continue, according to developer Rodney Sutton of NNGS LLC.

The property is part of a "package of distressed assets," he said.

"During the course of that process, we had exercised an option to purchase the property for development," Sutton said. "Our option was approved by the court but it has a very short timeline."

"They would like to know that the project is approved and done," Sutton said of Sacred Heart. "We are really putting the cart before the horse. Usually the deal is done before we come for approvals. We are running everything in parallel right now."

He said the design process focused on meeting as many design and building requirements as possible to prevent the possibility of having to come back for multiple reviews.

Members of both boards commented favorably on the project.

"I think it's good for the community, all things being equal," John Adams of the DRB said. "Sacred Heart is a good corporation."

If built, the building will have nine examination rooms for three pediatricians. It will also house rehabilitation services as well as an X-ray facility. More than \$100,000 in landscaping has been designed for the site.

It will have frontage on Gulf Breeze Parkway and Daniel Drive, with vehicular and pedestrian entrances on the latter. A Gulf Breeze Parkway entrance will be for pedestrians only.

"It is just going to make that corner so inviting," said Deborah Cederquist, a member of the architectural review board. "It is a super improvement and a worthwhile project, as well."

ARB board member David Alsop asked what the project's public amenity would be. That led to a discussion of possibilities like a sculpture or a fountain. The current design provides walkability and benches for outdoor seating.

The city's master plan called for medical offices to come to that location in order to diversify the types of businesses in the area, which is dominated by restaurants and retail.

"It is a perfect fit for that parcel," said Shane Carmichael, Gulf Breeze director of community services.

In addition to city council approval, the construction plans also have to go before Santa Rosa County for review.

Last month Sacred Heart announced the construction of medical facilities in the Perdido Bay area and in Tiger Point, east of Gulf Breeze. Both are scheduled to open next year.

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NEWS

Educational

Continued from Page 1A

ready and prepared for kindergarten. Lincoln Park was one of two schools of 14 district-led voluntary pre-kindergarten programs to earn a 100 kindergarten readiness score.

"There's been a cultural change in the school, and for me as a leader, that's not a whole lot I have to give of myself to make this work for everybody," Smith said. "Because we had to change the culture and climate of the school, it is important to be hands-on in the classrooms everyday to let my teachers and students see my face."

Escambia County School District Superintendent Malcolm Thomas said Lincoln Park clearly is a different school than it was three years ago.

In addition to new teachers and principal, the school implemented a curriculum rich in STEM (Science, Technology, Math and Science) activities, including the arts and music.

"They're doing a great job by taking a challenging population and proving that, given the right kind of attention, they can increase aptitude," Thomas said.

Worthwhile investment

Kindergarten is, in many ways, the gateway to a child's educational journey. While kindergarten is not mandated in Florida, the increased educational demands brought about by tougher standards and an increased focus on school grades and state testing mean there's even greater emphasis on learning in kindergarten.

That's all the more reason why at a school that serves a community facing societal and economic challenges, the benefits of a high-quality pre-K are immeasurable. It is critical to closing the achievement gap between children of different economic backgrounds and for preparing them for kindergarten, primary school and beyond.

The Studer Community Institute Dashboard's kindergarten readiness metric shows that 66.2 percent of Escambia County's 5-year-olds are ready for kindergarten.

Of the nearly 3,000 kindergartners in Escambia County schools this year, about 1,000 of them weren't ready for school.

More than 175,000 4-year-olds statewide participate in VPK, which is 77 percent of all eligible children.

In the first year of VPK in 2002, the state allotted \$2,500 for early learning per child. More than a decade later, the allotment is \$2,437 for each child in VPK.

Escambia County's share of the funding for this current school year is \$5.4 million.

VPK offers childcare providers funding to pay for a half-day of preschool for all Florida 4-year-olds. That means a child would have to either leave at noon or go to daycare to continue for a full day.

Lincoln Park is among 14 schools in Escambia County that receive Title I money to pay for a full day of VPK. Most agree that full-day VPK is a worthy investment to provide a high-quality early education for young children.

"The extended time is good because the teachers get a chance to go in-depth," Smith said. "VPK should be for the whole day, and we are fortunate to have it."

High-quality environment

As interest in pre-K has increased and more states have implemented pre-K programs, while policymakers have identified core requirements for program success. These include: highly trained teachers with expertise in early childhood education, learning goals tied to K-12 standards, low child/staff ratios, and small class sizes.

Model pre-K programs validate the benefits of hiring teachers with a strong background in education and training. More recent state pre-K studies also document the effectiveness of programs with certified teachers with college degrees.

Having trained, certified teachers with college degrees is crucial in providing a high-quality early education, said Marsha Nowlin, Escambia's director of Title I.

"We have certified teachers and qualified para-professionals," Nowlin said. "There are lots of opportunities to individualize."

At Lincoln Park, about 40 students in two classes participate in VPK, with another 60 students in three kindergarten classes.

With a small number of classes and fewer students, Smith was able to buy iPads and Leap Frog Tag books for each student using Title I money.

A Tag book is an electronic, hand-held stylus that plays prerecorded audio. Children use it to learn how to read through hearing sounds.

"You can walk into any class and each person could be sitting at a table with an iPad or Tag book, playing educational games," Smith said.

In another part of the room, the teacher could be having a small group lesson, working on



RON STALLCUP / SPECIAL TO THE NEWS JOURNAL
Emily Ellis, pre-K teacher at Lincoln Park Primary School, credits the school's 100 readiness rate to teachers collectively collaborating, communicating and share ideas.

What it means to be kindergarten ready

If orange is the new black, then kindergarten is the new first grade.

Tougher academic requirements, increased pressure from state-mandated testing and higher expectations in the classrooms have more parents wondering if their children are ready for kindergarten.

There is no single indicator to determine when a child is kindergarten ready, but your child is probably ready to start kindergarten if he or she:

» Listens to instructions and then follows them. Children need these skills to function in class, to keep up with the teacher and with their peers.

» Is able to put on his coat and go the bathroom by himself. Children need to be somewhat self-sufficient by school age.

» Can recite the alphabet and count. Most kindergarten teachers assume that children have at least a rudimentary familiarity with the ABCs and numbers, though these subjects will be covered as part of the kindergarten curriculum.

» Can hold a pencil and cut with scissors. He will need these fine motor skills to begin working on writing the alphabet and keeping up with classroom projects.

» Show interest in books. Does he try to "read" a book by telling a story based on the pictures? This is a sign that his language development is on a par with other kindergartners and that he's ready to start learning how to read.

» Curious and receptive to learning new things. If a child's curiosity is stronger than his fear of the unfamiliar, he will do well in school.

» Get along well with other kids. Does she share and know how to take turns? She'll be interacting with other children all day, so your child's social skills are particularly important for success in school.

» Work together with others as part of a group. The ability to put his needs second, to compromise and join in a consensus with other children, is also part of emotional competence.

numbers, letters or a STEM activity.

Laura Colo, Escambia's Title I assistant director, spent time developing the STEM program at Lincoln Park.

Having the STEM curriculum integrated into the every aspect of the classroom is a bonus that enhances learning at all levels, Colo said.

"They use the creative curriculum, which is designed to integrate all of the learning throughout the day in math, science, literacy and reading," said Colo. "The language and vocabulary is so important in everything we do, and it well-serves our students."

Hiring the right people

While Smith relishes the integration of STEM in every classroom, she believes the success at Lincoln Park is mostly because of teachers she has hired and brought along with her.

That includes teachers like C.C. Lambert, with whom Smith worked at other schools and whose wife teaches third grade at Lincoln Park.

Lambert — a special-education support facilitation teacher — works with students in small groups who need extra help.

"I am a workaholic who works all the time, and you have to know the people who want to follow me here have to be workaholics too," Smith said.

With a minority enrollment of 80 percent and 82 percent of students eligible

for free or reduced-price meals, Lincoln Park sits in a mostly impoverished neighborhood on Kershaw Street, near the Interstate 10/U.S. 29 interchange in Escambia County.

Smith gives credit to her teachers and staff for accepting the challenge to work in a school that serves a low-income, disadvantaged demographic.

Part of the success at Lincoln Park, Smith said, goes to finding and hiring the right people to do the best job.

Lambert said the staff has accepted a shared vision of what their leader wants to accomplish.

"If you don't buy into the vision of the leader, or if I decide to do my own thing, it's a crack in what we're trying to accomplish," Lambert said. "So having the right people is having people who share in the vision and are willing to say, 'this is what we are doing to set the culture of the school.'"

Smith hired Emily Ellis to teach pre-K not long after Ellis finished college at Western Michigan two years ago. She offered her a job over the telephone, sight unseen.

Smith was especially impressed with Ellis' experience in teaching abroad in Africa and Europe, which Smith figured would bring a different and new perspective to Lincoln Park.

Ellis drove from Kalamazoo, Mich., unaware of the challenges that Lincoln Park presented.

Smith said Ellis immediately fit into the culture they had created to make Lincoln Park a high-performing school.

Not only has Ellis proven to be an effective teacher, she also has a knack for understanding the needs of her students.

"The first thing you have to do is to make sure their basic needs are met," Ellis said. "You just have to make sure they're loved and show them you care."

Caring could mean having an extra Pop Tart to share with a hungry child. It could be allowing a tired child to rest until the others have finished breakfast. Or it could mean staying late for a parent conference.

'All children can learn'

Teachers at Lincoln Park know that they can meet with Smith any time, any day. Her open-door policy extends to the classrooms. Teachers can expect to see Smith show up in a classroom at any hour of the day.

On this day, the pre-kindergartners sit in a circle on a huge blue rug covered with numbers, shapes and alphabets.

During circle time, Ellis sings along with music to the tune of the book, "Chicka Chicka Boom Boom."

She pulls a stack of mail from a basket that includes the letters of the day.

"Guess what I have in here," Ellis said, her voice rising with inflection. "All

these letters are for us."

For children in preschool, learning has to be interactive and fun, Ellis said.

"There's a big push away from play, but they learn so much through play," Ellis said. "That's how I try to run my small groups. They have self-directed play, which is center time, for an hour. They play and they learn how to play with each other."

What makes Smith most proud is seeing the teachers working together, developing lesson plans, spending extra time with challenging students, staying late for conferences, programs and meetings with parents.

"One thing I wanted to do when I came here three years ago is to have true collaborative planning, and I can say this year it is working the way I want it to," Smith said. "They get together in the evening and they forget what time it is. They get off at 2:45, and at 4:30 I'm sitting up there in my office and they're still here."

The Lincoln Park team takes to heart the three Cs: culture, communication and collaboration.

Kindergarten teacher La'Tris Sykes said the school's foundation is built on collaboration.

Even with nine years of teaching experience, Sykes said she's open to learning from colleagues who may have just started.

"For me to be able to go into somebody else's room and say, 'This is not working for me,' but then they are able to make it work," Sykes said. "We learn from each other."

One area that schools like Lincoln Park needed to improve was parental involvement.

Effective parental involvement comes when a true partnership exists between schools and families, according to the Center for Public Education.

In a CPE survey of teachers, two-thirds believed that their students would perform better if their parents were more involved in their education, while 72 of parents say children of uninvolved parents sometimes "fall through the cracks" in school.

Smith's open-door policy extends to parents and visitors. Through her office window, she can see everyone who enters. She answers her direct phone line.

Among other activities to encourage parental engagement, Smith hosts a book club, math workshop, report card conference, a family STEM night, and breakfast with books for pre-K.

"The two things I think that has helped me at Lincoln Park are parental involvement and hiring the right people," Smith said.

"You have to have the right people in place who believe what you believe — that all children can learn."

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DEVELOPMENT

Lost Key is more than just a home

Close-knit community prepares for expansion, more neighbors

CARLOS GIESEKEN
 CGIESEKEN@PNJ.COM

Bonnie Engelbracht and her husband moved to Perdido Key in 2007 from Syracuse, New York, exchanging brutal winters for the snow-white sands of northwest Florida's Gulf Coast.

Over the years, she and her neighbors who live in the Lost Key Golf and Beach Club have grown close. Last week they organized a progressive dinner, with 30 participants moving through different units that hosted appetizers, a main course and dessert.

"We are coming together as a community," she said Friday afternoon, in the middle of a walk through the development with a friend.

Engelbracht will soon have many more neighbors, as project developer WCI has a three-phase plan to add 180 residences to the 205 existing mix of mid-rise condominiums and single family homes.

"We're just really excited," she said. "The economy threw everybody a curve. That's why it's so good to watch everything coming together."

Last week, the first eight of 28 planned town-home residences went up for sale. Within the first three days, WCI Senior Project Manager Greg Jones said more than 60 would-be buyers toured the model home.

Marketed as Resort Villas, each has four bedrooms and four baths spread over 2,100 square feet with prices starting at about \$370,000.

Ground work has begun on the next phase, which will consist of two- and three-bedroom units. Finally, a third phase will see more of the four-bedroom Resort Villas constructed.

The Arnold Palmer-designed, 18-hole golf course is a prominent feature on the 413-acre property. A yacht club provides wet and dry slip leases.

"The home is just a segment of the lifestyle you are purchasing," Jones said. "Our sense of community is what we focus on."

Jones oversees the efforts of contractors building units and clearing roads that will connect the existing and future phases of the project. A bridge over wetlands is also under construction.

There was a seven-year permitting process with the federal government to plan around nature preserves for the Perdido Key beach mouse resulting in the setting aside of more than 300 acres of the property for that purpose.

Landscaping along the roads will feature flora

See Lost Key, Page 6A



CARLOS GIESEKEN/CGIESEKEN@PNJ.COM

WCI has plans to add 28 townhome residences to its Lost Key Golf & Beach Club in Perdido Key. Last week, the first eight went up for sale, with prices starting in the \$370,000 range.

EARLY EDUCATION » PART 4



MICHAEL SPOONEYBARGER/SPECIAL TO THE NEWS JOURNAL

Every Child A Reader in Escambia (ECARE) Reading Pal Stephanie Mutz reads with Taylor Stanberry at Montclair Elementary School.

ECARE EXPANDS REACH, SUCCESS

TOM ST. MYER TSTMAYER@PNJ.COM

The sight of kids clinging to the necks of their Reading Pals after an hour together is commonplace in Montclair Elementary School pre-K classrooms.

Reading Pals is an Every Child A Reader in Escambia (ECARE) program, and Montclair pre-K teacher volunteer Myra Buskey says kids covet that hour each week with their reading pal. She cites breakthroughs by a hearing-impaired student with a speech impediment as a prime example. She says the student barely said a word to anyone, but he came out of his shell after spending time with his male reading pal.

Buskey says few adults outside of teachers take interest in a significant number of Montclair students. That perhaps partially explains why the school received an F for 2014-15 school year, a slight downgrade from a D the previous school year.

"I think it's beneficial to the kids, because most of the kids in our area, they don't have a lot of one-on-one parenting at home," Buskey says. "It doesn't take the place of it, but it helps out with what they're missing at home. It helps out majorly as far as that goes."

ECARE is in its fifth year and serves 177 kids at six preschools — A Top Notch Christian Academy, Global Learning Academy, Gibson Head Start, McMillan Pre-K Center, Montclair and C.A. Weis. The nonprofit is a collaboration of business leaders, community members, educators and social service providers who focus on improving preschoolers' literacy skills in the county.

Studies by the Studer Institute indicated two years ago about one-third of children in the county entered kindergarten unprepared based on state evaluations. That total shot up into the 90th percentile this year after the Florida Department of Education revamped testing, but teachers and administrators almost unanimously agree that the 66 percentile from two years

See Education, Page 5A

Want to help?

Call 433-6893 or email director@escambiareads.org

Area kids, teachers help FSU research how people learn

SHANNON NICKINSON
 SPECIAL TO THE NEWS JOURNAL

Building better readers begins long before kindergarten.

Researchers at Florida State University have spent six years studying how young children learn to recognize letters, read words and then put them in context to learn to read. It is research that has included children — and teachers — in the Pensacola metro area.

FSU has a \$26 million share of a \$100 million-plus grant from the Institute of Education Sciences, the research arm of the U.S. Department of Education, to study why some kids struggle to understand what they read.

Understanding — or reading comprehension — is different from decoding the letters of a word to sound it out and say it aloud.

More than 130 researchers representing linguistics, cognitive psychology, developmental psychology, reading, speech and language pathology, assessment and evaluation have been involved.

See Learn, Page 5A



MICHAEL SPOONEYBARGER/SPECIAL TO THE NEWS JOURNAL

Sandy Lyons reads to VPK students at Trinity Learning Center. The center participated in research by FSU to determine how to help children become better readers.

INSIDE

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NEWS

Education

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ago better indicates the percentage of kids properly prepared for kindergarten.

ECARE Executive Director Ashley Bodmer says the nonprofit initially served about 40 Global Learning Academy students. The program is slowly expanding its reach with McMillan, the latest addition. Bodmer says her vision is to ultimately serve about 1,200 students.

"We'd be hitting the lowest 33 percent of kids," she says.

One of the challenges for ECARE in serving kids in low-income areas is the high-turnover rate at the schools. Bodmer says enrollment at Global Learning Academy is static, but that school is the exception to the rule.

"We deal with a highly mobile student population. It's sort of a continuous moving target," Bodmer says. "We feel we have every kid matched and then we'll get a couple students or lose a student and have to reassign a volunteer."

ECARE hosts other activities such as Family Night, but its Reading Pals program is the foundation for which the nonprofit positively impacts kids. The volunteers spend that hour with their mentees reading, playing board games and piecing together puzzles among other activities.

Buskey raves about the Reading Pals program. She says one of the kids benefiting from ECARE is her grandson, Jayden Buskey.

"They review things we're teaching kids. He comes back and he's made stuff for his mom," Myra Buskey says. "They practice writing with kids, read books with him, and he talks about books they read."

Sometimes carving out a mere hour at a set time on a set day each week is a challenge. Stacey Kostevicki puts in anywhere from 55 to 60 hours a week as executive director at Gulf Coast Kid's House, a children's advocacy center. She still manages to positively influence a Head Start preschooler by rotating Mondays with Bella Editor Kelly MacLeod.

Kostevicki says her mentee is usually hyper and resists reading when she first arrives at Gibson Head Start. The preschooler prefers activities that involve colors and numbers. Her favorite is when Kostevicki uses the puppet Farm-



MICHAEL SPOONEY/BARGER/SPECIAL TO THE NEWS JOURNAL

Every Child A Reader in Escambia (ECARE) Reading Pal Grace Whalen reads with Troyelle Harrison at Montclair Elementary School.

"She was really shy and reserved. She's more engaged. ... There's been times when she's actually grabbed a book instead of just wanting to play."

KELLY MACLEOD
ECARE VOLUNTEER

er Joe to identify colors. One of the rules Kostevicki established is they read a book together before playing with Farmer Joe or any other games.

MacLeod says their mentee is progressing academically and socially.

"She was really shy and reserved. She's more engaged," MacLeod says. "Another thing that's more exciting is there's been times when she's actually grabbed a book instead of just wanting to play."

Every minute is precious in the hour Kostevicki, MacLeod and other mentors spend with their mentees. The sobering reality is that hour is possibly the only positive adult influence the kids will receive that week from someone other than their teachers.

"It's exciting to know you're going to see the child that day," Kostevicki says. "But some of the feedback I've heard from others is you can really tell what the home life is like for the children."



TONY GIBERSON/TGIBERSON@PNJ.COM

S.S. Dixon Intermediate School Principal Linda Gooch, top right, looks on as children fill up a new Little Free Library on Monday afternoon.

Reese

Continued from Page 3A

literacy organizations and local governments are yet another crucial component. Ultimately, a literate populace will have a much more positive impact on producing a vibrant economy.

Santa Rosa County gets it. There's a lot going on when it comes to books and reading. Recently, a host of book lovers, readers, and literacy supporters turned out to celebrate the grand opening of the first Little Free Library at Benny Russell Park in Pace. Residents were excited at the opportunity to "take a book, return a book" from this unique free book exchange. Now a second site is preparing to open at the Floridatown Park. That ribbon cutting is scheduled for 12:30 p.m. Monday. The little library will be sponsored and monitored by the Pace SGA.

"The SGA students are so excited to sponsor a Little Free Library for the residents of Pace," Pace High SGA adviser Claudia Cassevah said. "It's our hope that this Little Free Library will not only promote literacy but also help bring the community together

through reading."

A Little Free Library cycles through as many as 100 books per month. Residents are encouraged to attend today's ceremony and bring a book or more to help stock the shelves. For more information visit Little Free Library online.

Not only are we celebrating a new literacy outlet, we are also celebrating the 10th birthday of Santa Rosa County's library system this year. Though there have been many changes, the one thing that hasn't changed is the contributions the system makes to our community.

The five locations in Milton, Pace, Jay, Navarre and Gulf Breeze continue to provide access to information, books, movies, music, public computers, Wi-Fi, and technology as well as present informative and fun programs for all ages.

To thank the community for being a part of the library system's very own story, members can enter to win a \$10 bookstore gift card by checking out items from one of the five libraries on the 10th of each month through October. One winner will be chosen monthly from each location. A special birthday party take place at all libraries on Oct. 10.

Learn

Continued from Page 1A

Back in 2014, Dr. Elizabeth Crowe was one of the researchers working with children in the Pensacola metro area on the Reading for Understanding research project.

"We know a lot about how to teach kids to decode, but what we struggle with is comprehension," Crowe said then. "If they lack comprehension skills, they can sound out the words, but they can't analyze text."

Jeanine L. Clancy is a senior research associate at the Florida Center for Reading Research at FSU and also is part of the team.

"When children are in school and reading, if they don't have any background knowledge on a topic, they don't have anything to connect their new learning to. It just hangs there," Clancy says. "If they've never been to a zoo or heard about a zoo, reading about animals in a zoo isn't as meaningful."

When the team started out, they narrowed in on 19 strategies in classrooms to help children who struggled to improve their reading comprehension. Most effective was small group instruction where the children discussed a story they just read to see how much of it they retained and how well they link what they heard with what they already knew.

They followed pre-kindergarten, first- and third-graders for three years to get a sense of whether children held on to the progress they made as they moved through early elementary school.

They have recently finished collecting the last data on those children. The analysis will continue through the summer, Clancy says.

In this sixth year of the project, Clancy says they added a new layer.

In previous years, FSU-hired interventionists did the work with children.

"We wanted be able to have the classroom teacher implement the intervention to see if the results could be attained by the typical classroom teacher," Clancy said. "We want to see how much professional development does the teacher

need to implement that same intervention (and get similar results)."

They are testing two levels of professional development. All the teachers got a half-day, face-to-face training session on the interventions, which are to take place four times a week over an eight-week period.

Teachers then were randomly assigned into two groups. One group gets feedback weekly from a coach who either observes the teacher in person or watches a recording of a lesson and gives feedback by email.

The other group doesn't have the weekly coaching.

"We have to wait until the end of the semester to see if it makes a difference," Clancy says.

So far, Clancy says, the research has shown that the intervention works.

"(But) it's really, really hard to close the gap," Clancy said. "It takes more than just one year of intervention. It takes good instruction year after year, but if you pinpoint what the child needs, you find interventions to help."

"Each year of schooling, there is a cumulative effect," Clancy says. "If you have strong teachers year after year, all that has an effect on what the child retains. That's something that needs to be examined more carefully."

Sometimes, even that is not enough.

"Every year of school, in every school no matter what side of town you're on, has to be doing the right thing with the best teachers and the best curriculum and the best environment, and even that can be an uphill battle if they come from a family without the resources to build those early vocabulary skills, to take them to the zoo or to have these experiences that are so important to learning vocabulary" and how those words give children more hooks upon which to hang new concepts and words.

So, what can parents do?

They need to have regular daily conversations with their children, Clancy believes.

"Label things, give them the vocabulary; read to them. And have it be more than reading the book and closing it," she says. "Talk about the story and things happening in the book. It's very important to take your children out on errands ... talk about what you are doing and why you are doing it."

U.S. 98 (Gregory Street) and State Road 196 (Bayfront Parkway) at 17th Avenue Project Development and Environment (PD&E) Study Escambia County

Public Kick-off Meeting

Tuesday, March 29, 2016 • New World Landing Banquet Room
600 South Palafox Street, Pensacola • 5:30 p.m. - 6:30 p.m. CDT

Project Information

The purpose of the U.S. 98 (Gregory Street) and State Road 196 (Bayfront Parkway) at 17th Avenue PD&E Study is to analyze and improve safety conditions as well as travel efficiencies along the corridor in conjunction with the new Pensacola Bay Bridge. This includes vehicular and multi-modal traffic, emergency evacuation, and traffic operations to meet future travel demands while minimizing impacts to the surrounding environment. The study will contain assessments of future traffic projections, regional mobility, social and economic factors, and environmental impacts and enhancements.

Meeting Information

The meeting will introduce the project, explain the PD&E process, and provide an opportunity for input from the public. Maps, drawings, and other information will be on display. FDOT representatives will be available to answer questions and receive comments concerning this project; there will be no formal presentation.

Those wishing to submit written comments/questions may do so at the meeting, via email to april.williams@dot.state.fl.us, or by U.S. Mail to April Williams, P.E., FDOT Project Manager, 1074 Highway 90, Chipley, Florida 32428. All comments must be postmarked no later than Friday, April 8 to become part of the official meeting document.

For More Information
 Should you have questions regarding the project or the meeting, please contact:
April Williams, P.E.
 FDOT Project Manager
 Phone: Toll-free (888) 638-0250, ext. 1625
 Email: april.williams@dot.state.fl.us
Ian Satter
 District Three Public Information Director
 Phone: Toll-free (888) 638-0250, ext. 1205
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