



School district continues ambitious PreK expansion

By Colleen Jones
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Building upon the success it's had in expanding PreK programs, the St. Johns County School District is gearing up to add even more offerings for this summer and next school year.

Since 2015, the school district has doubled its enrollment, capacity and resources for early childhood learning and, under the leadership of director Brian McElhone, is ahead of schedule in meeting the goals the department set for itself when it decided to make preschool learning a priority three years ago.

PreK enrollment in St. Johns County public schools has gone from 160 in 2015, to 329 in the 2017-18 school year. Making more space and teachers available, the district could see those numbers climb much higher in the near future.

Currently, the program operates 47 PreK classrooms across the district and educates 690 children ages 3 to 5. With the recent opening of another room at The Webster School, McElhone was able to place eight more 3-year-olds with another teacher he lined up.

"We follow a certain formula," McElhone explained. "Once we hit a tipping point for funding sources through [students who would enroll], we can add another teacher and another classroom."

Those funding sources are the federal Head Start program; state Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten program; and state Exceptional Student Education program, which caters to preschoolers with developmental disabilities.

The district picks up the bill for additional teachers, paraprofessionals and classroom space as the program grows.

The summer PreK program has increased its footprint as well, expanding from just three classrooms at one site in summer 2016 to this summer's nine classrooms at three sites. This includes Ocean Palms Elementary in Ponte Vedra Beach, which McElhone said he hope helps families in the northern part of the county. The hours are set up similarly to the school year, 7:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., to make the program convenient for working parents. Classes are taught by the same level certified teachers using the appropriate curriculum for kindergarten readiness, but the summer program has other "camp-like" elements like arts and crafts and water games.

Summer VPK is expected to register about 100 kids for classes in June and July for a total of 300 hours of instruction. Another summer program for preschoolers is run by Five Learning Years (FLY) to engage children at Woodlawn Terrace Apartments in St. Augustine. Many of those children never set foot in an academic environment before they enter kindergarten, said director Mary Alice Hays.

It's that early exposure — to learning, social interaction, following rules and routines — that those in the PreK world say is needed to get children ready for school later on.

As she observed Rosalind Sandcroft, one of her PreK teachers in the classroom at The Webster School last week, principal Bethany Groves said, "The earlier we can get them in here, the more likely they are to be successful in school."

Sandcroft had her young students gathered around her for a reading lesson which then turned into a science lesson when Sandcroft asked what the funnel in her hand was for.

"It helps small things go in small place," one little girl volunteered.

"That's exactly right," Sandcroft said, beaming, "Now, let's see what would happen when if I put the sand in here?"

More than a dozen sets of eyes followed the bright blue sand as it filtered its way from the funnel into a water bottle below.

"Oooh," said another student, "It looks like ocean water now."