

A Touch of Class for Pre-K

A publicly funded program helps bring students up to speed

By Nathaniel W. Martin Jr.

Children who haven't experienced classroom learning or day care before kindergarten are at a disadvantage when they enter school—and such a disadvantage can follow them throughout life. At the Enterprise Early Education Center (EEEC), we found that the students without preschool or day care experience started out significantly behind peers who had been enrolled in day care or preschool, and we wanted to do something about it.

Many of these students were beginning kindergarten without prior exposure to the letters and sounds of the alphabet, creating a significant gap between them and the students who had been enrolled in day care or preschool. Further investigation showed that students with experience in licensed day care or "mom and pop" preschools were starting out very far ahead of those students who had no previous experience in a school-like setting.

The lack of exposure produced several side effects. The first was that these students experienced more difficulty in adjusting to a classroom setting and daily schedule. Most behavioral problems and disciplinary referrals came from the students with

no experience in a preschool or day care environment. Excessive absences and tardies were higher among these students, as well. Many of the referrals to special education came from these same children. And teachers had to spend extra time with these students in an effort to close the knowledge gap.

Filling a Void

Two years ago, EEEC launched an effort to add a publicly funded pre-K program. In coordination with our superintendent and elementary education supervisor, we included the construction of a pre-K wing in our capital plan. We secured a grant to fund one unit completely beginning in the 2015–2016 school year, including teacher and aide units, classroom supplies, and teacher supplies. In January 2016, we added another unit, and we began the 2016–2017 school year with five units.

One of our initial concerns was the recruitment of students who needed pre-K but who might be unaware of the program. We targeted certain socioeconomic groups through local churches and began a registration drive to help parents who might not take or have the time to register their children do so. Staff members also helped reach out to many parents and students. We offered assistance in completing registration forms and applications, and we were able to fill all of the available slots in our units and still have several students on a waiting list.

From the outset, the pre-K program focused on developmentally

appropriate practices. Instead of forcing children to catch up on their own, the curriculum meets children at their current stage of development and works from there. The learning environment features a play-based learning style that helps children develop a love of learning while getting accustomed to classroom settings and the expectations they present. Play-based learning also allows students to adjust socially and emotionally to school while building their confidence, developing self-regulation, and creating social competence.

Reading Results

Because of community involvement in the recruitment process, our pre-K classes are diverse and consist of students from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Our classes also include several English as a Second Language students. Last year, the majority of our students in both pre-K units not only knew their letters and sounds, but they were also probable readers by the end of the year. According to the Star Early Literacy data we monitored, they had shown great progress.

The establishment of the pre-K unit inside the Enterprise Early Education Center has proven to be an asset to our community and our kindergarten center. We hope to continue to be able to grow and fund opportunities for those needing pre-K exposure to be a part of the EEEC's pre-K program. □

Nathaniel W. Martin Jr. is principal of Enterprise Early Education Center in Enterprise, Alabama.

A play-based learning style helps children develop a love of learning while getting accustomed to classroom settings and the expectations they present.