



WILLIAMSBURG — When 299 graduates earned diplomas from Whitley County High School this June, it would have been hard to know which students might not have been there without the district’s 20-year investment in pre-k.

Statistics, however, make it clear that the graduating class would likely have been much smaller. In 1990, just before the pre-k program began, the Whitley County graduating class numbered 173. The district’s annual dropout rate stood at over 6.8 percent. Over four years, that translates to 27 percent of the freshman class that wouldn’t make it to graduation.

The high failure rate was a leading factor in a state takeover of the Whitley County schools in 1989. As the district emerged from state oversight in 1991, new superintendent Lonnie Anderson began what has become a continuing effort to aggressively grow the preschool program launched by the state as part of the 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act.

“Building a stronger foundation through preschool was one of the pieces we had to put in place for our kids to perform better academically,” said Anderson, who retired at the end of June. The district now counts 380 students in its pre-k and Head

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ABOVE: Students in a pre-k class at Oak Grove Elementary School in Whitley County work on an art project. The district has made a major investment in pre-k over the past two decades.

#### **KEEPING THE FOCUS ON KENTUCKY SCHOOLS**

This Perspectives Special Report is part of the Prichard Committee’s newsletter, now in its 20th year. We hope you’ll find our reports, delivered by e-mail, another useful way to keep up with issues facing Kentucky schools. Go to [www.prichardcommittee.org](http://www.prichardcommittee.org) or e-mail us at [admin@prichardcommittee.org](mailto:admin@prichardcommittee.org) to add your name to our e-mail list.

## Pre-K Success Story: Whitley Sees Long-Term Gains | Continued

Start programs and about 100 more in its daycare and associated early care options. Anderson said it is no coincidence that growth in pre-k preceded an impressive lowering of the district's yearly dropout rate, which has shrunk from the 6.84 percent of 1989 to 0.84 percent last year. At the same time, achievement is on the rise.

"Our original goal was to perform in the top 50 percent of Kentucky school districts, then the top 25 percent," Anderson said. "We've been able to accomplish that and more." Indeed, Whitley County High School earned a Bronze Award in both 2009 and 2010 from the *U.S. News* ranking of the nation's best high schools.

As Anderson led a tour of the pre-k wing at Oak Grove Elementary School, he described the range of programs the district has woven together to build its extensive pre-k approach. What began as a half-day option for children who qualified based on income has grown into a full-day, five-day-a-week program that combines federal and state programs with a sizable contribution from the district's general fund.

### GROWING OPTIONS

The district offers full-day pre-k to all four-year-olds, including free breakfast, and all three-year-olds eligible through the state's preschool funding. Students eligible for Head Start also participate through a longstanding collaboration between the district and the Bell-Whitley Community Action Agency.

In addition, the district's pre-k offerings include early childhood education and literacy services through the nonprofit group Save the Children, and services through Project CLICK, a collaborative program involving the Eastern Kentucky Child Care Coalition, the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina, and Save the Children.

Beyond that, the district offers a home-based early childhood program and daycare called Preschool Prep which started to serve the children of students enrolled in the school system but has grown because of need for daycare options in the community. In all of the programs, children have access to quality instructors, a focused set of learning activities, and classrooms full of technology from SMART Boards to surround sound. The district has also constructed new facilities specifically for pre-k.

"We had so many kids who were behind when they started and they never caught up," said Delmar Mahan, the chairman of the Whitley County school board who also serves as president of the Kentucky School Boards Association. "We were one of the worst districts in the state, but getting our children ready for school through pre-k and with technology — it's made a world of difference."

The board has been a steady champion of the pre-k expansion. In 2008-09, the district spent \$369,000 from its general fund on pre-k services. That funding was combined with \$352,000 in state preschool funds and applied another \$39,000 in state flexible focus funds to run the pre-k program. In 2007-08, local funding amounted to nearly \$490,000. This year, the district allocated \$450,000, a combination of federal stimulus funds and general funds, to supplement \$383,000 in state funding.

Achievement data shows the impact of a robust, focused pre-k program, said Ralph Johnson, the district's director of special education. "As they matriculate through the system, we see preschool kids performing better throughout their career," he said. The benefits are also noticeable among students identified for special education services, with fewer referrals in lower elementary grades. The district has paid close attention to the results of pre-k. For



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— Lonnie Anderson,  
Whitley County superintendent

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example, high school officials noted that of the 25 students who dropped out in 2007-08, only 2 had attended Whitley County pre-k a decade before.

Anderson said that the longevity of the program is producing even greater results. For example, the majority of kindergarten students in the district are now students who went through the Whitley County pre-k, creating fewer transition issues. Indeed, the program has led to a makeover for kindergarten. Several years ago, the district had to revisit its exit criteria for kindergarten because pre-k learning experiences prepared so many students for kindergarten that they were able to meet first-grade entry targets halfway through kindergarten.

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In addition, earlier experiences with children have built stronger relationships between the school system and families. Anderson said many parents see the district’s pre-k offerings as a huge bargain, with free all-day classes and meals. The pre-k program also measures students skills at the beginning, middle and end of the year and works with parents to discuss development issues and learning goals. Monthly family reading and math nights as well as parent literacy services are also designed to build positive relationships.

### **BUILDING STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS**

The pre-k emphasis is also an emblem of a districtwide focus on making sure students are ready to succeed. Whitley County has identified key areas where the district does not want to see students fall behind, targeting areas where small failures may snowball:

- Students not reading on grade level by the end of third grade are identified for intensive intervention through a Reading Recovery program and a reading resource teacher, along with intervention teachers funded by the federal Title I program.

- Board policy requires an additional math or reading course for any middle school student performing below grade level in either content area. All students at Whitley County Middle School take a reading course each year.

- Passing Algebra I is a top priority. The district uses a program for all eighth and ninth graders where students spend significant time working on a self-paced computer program to master algebra concepts. During the first year of that program, Algebra I failure rates dropped from 40 percent to single digits, officials said.

- The district also operates an extensive credit recovery program with summer, school-day, and after school options for high school students who have failed any classes.

Mahan, the school board chairman, said that in looking back at the improvement work during Anderson’s tenure as superintendent, the focus on building a robust pre-k program stands out because it gives many students a solid footing to succeed in school. He said the state would be wise to recognize the dividends of a strong pre-k program.

“The biggest thing the state needs to do is to fund all-day kindergarten in combination with a strong pre-k program,” he said. “It’s very needed. Our KSBA regional meetings have been devoted to early childhood issues and there’s a widespread sense that our state really needs to do more.”

“If a child is not ready when it’s time to start school, they are going to stay behind,” he added. “We realize that.”

Anderson agreed that reliable funding for a strong pre-k program is a major need in the state. “It’s hard to keep quality personnel in the program when there’s no certainty they’ll be kept from one year to the next, and every year when there are budget negotiations in Frankfort, they always talk about pre-k being cut,” he said. “In order for Kentucky to have the best program it could, we need to resolve the funding issue on a permanent basis and adequately.”

Johnson, the special education director, said that events at every level of the school system in Whitley County — from commencement to elementary reading screenings — shows the benefits of pre-k: “There was a time when people felt like the vision of preschool importance was innovative, but now, people here see that it’s a necessity.”

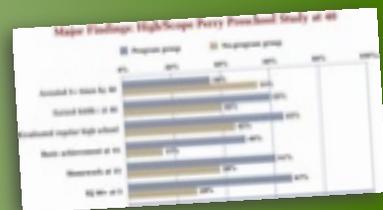
### **FURTHER READING:**

Starting in 1962, researchers began following a group of Michigan students enrolled at the Perry Preschool. Follow-up reports document their gains in income, education, and more.

- Read about the 2005 report at [www.highscope.org/content.asp?contentid=219](http://www.highscope.org/content.asp?contentid=219)

A 2009 University of Kentucky study found that expanding pre-k eligibility to twice the poverty level would yield \$5 in benefits for every \$1 spent.

- Read the report at [www.prichardcommittee.org/Portals/1059/Publications/CBER\\_early\\_educ\\_report\\_final.pdf](http://www.prichardcommittee.org/Portals/1059/Publications/CBER_early_educ_report_final.pdf)





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