



COVINGTON, Ky. — Teachers in the Newport school district are getting an unusually informative view of where their kindergarten students stand.

For most students, teachers see data that not only shows how students performed on the usual screening tests, but also how they fared in Head Start, the gains they made as three- and four-year-olds in pre-k or child care, and even development issues their parents addressed when the children were 1 or 2.

It's not only the school system that's learning from the groundbreaking database. Child care providers, Head Start teachers, and even organizations that provide healthy baby services can be part of the process, exploring which interventions and skills are working best to prepare students to succeed in kindergarten and the early years of elementary school.

“We’re starting to tackle some important questions about what children are doing when they are 4, 3, or even 1 that will help them be successful in school,” said Rick Hulefeld, executive director of

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ABOVE: Students work together at Newport Preschool Center, located at Newport Junior High School. The center is a joint venture of the Newport schools and Children, Inc.

KEEPING THE FOCUS ON KENTUCKY SCHOOLS

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Children, Inc., a provider of a range of early childhood services and a leader in developing the data project with the Newport school district.

“We can now zero in on early diagnostics as well as anybody,” added Michael Brandt, the Newport schools superintendent. “This shows what multiple agencies with different visions and missions can do when they come together around a common goal and share information and best practices.”

The data system was built and is maintained by Northern Kentucky University. It is a capstone of three decades of work by Hulefeld’s organization across Northern Kentucky. Children, Inc., has been a leader in encouraging accreditation of early childhood programs, certification of the adults who work with pre-k children, and nationally normed early childhood screenings to measure language abilities, social-emotional development, and other skills. The Newport program, now in its fifth year, adds the ability to track children’s progress.

Hulefeld said that children who spend at least two years in pre-k programs offered by Children, Inc., Head Start, and the Newport schools are 34 percent more likely

to possess above-average kindergarten readiness skills. Hulefeld said the results are especially encouraging since the programs involved serve a demographic group usually challenged by such screenings.



Students work a puzzle at Newport Preschool Center.

Most importantly, the data system allows the school system to provide very specific feedback to various child care providers, parents and social services agencies about how the children they serve are faring in school, where the children they work with are strongest and weakest as a group, and how well specific interventions or programs are working. Indeed, the various organizations have monthly meetings to discuss implications of the data.

“All the partners know the percentages, and we have very productive conversations about the things people are doing that might improve our outcomes,” Hulefeld said.

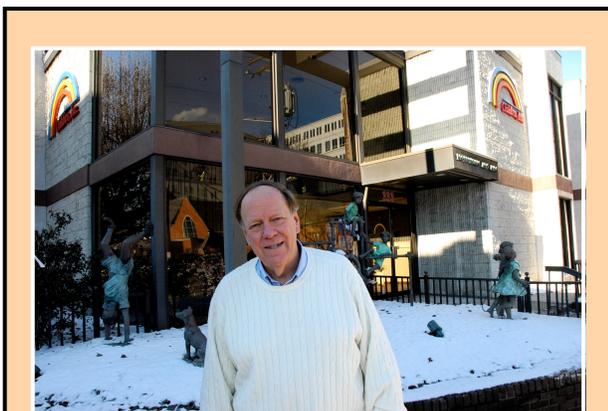
“Seeing who is providing what services from birth forward is a real asset,” Brandt added. “We are able to identify handicaps earlier and have a much better chance of addressing children’s needs. The data is also showing the difference that high quality programs and all-day services can make.”

Further evidence may be on the way. The next challenge for the NKU team that built the pre-k database is to integrate it into the school system’s Infinite Campus student records system, which should offer an opportunity to make students’ classroom performance part of the data mix.

For districts looking at strengthening or establishing early childhood data systems, Hulefeld recommended several steps:

- Schools should find nationally normed screenings of early childhood social and emotional skills, cognitive and language abilities, motor skills or other skills basic to school readiness. In Newport, the school district uses the Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning screening system, also known as DIAL-3. Hulefeld said that finding an assessment that includes ways to measure younger children can be helpful in developing common measures and conversations with other pre-k providers.

- School leaders should start conversations with child care and pre-k providers whose students feed into the school system and look closely at expectations and results. “When you can put together what they are seeing with what we are seeing, that’s a huge advantage when you’re talking about making sure three- and four-year-olds are ready to succeed,” Hulefeld said.



Group Fills Early Care Gaps

Based in Covington, Children, Inc., has grown to fill a number of roles across Northern Kentucky over the past three decades.

Founded by Rick Hulefeld, above, the group handles a range of services. In cooperation with several Northern Kentucky school districts, it provides in-school child care services for students who attend district pre-k programs. The group also offers administrative support and training for community child care providers. In recent years, it has also created a service-learning program for local schools to help students find their niche. “All children have the right to know they have unique gifts, and that they are needed,” Hulefeld said.

Find out more at www.childreninc.org.

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■ Schools should be aware of the quality measures for pre-k programs and set an example by making sure programs are accredited through the STARS rating system under the Kentucky KIDS NOW program or nationally through the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Such systems require programs to maintain high standards for curriculum development, health and safety, staffing, family involvement, and staff-child interaction. Hulefeld also said schools should encourage local child care and pre-k providers to earn accreditation — another step toward high-level conversations about quality programs and ways to improve.

■ Schools should strengthen connections to the wider community that deals with children’s issues, including agencies that make home visits to first-time parents, before- or after-school programs, and even programs within school districts like family resource or youth services centers. With all partners, a top issue should be reaching out to parents to help them understand

program goals, what children need to know and be able to do, and how they can be involved.

In building such a network focused on aligning resources and goals, sharing assessment data can be a catalyst for discussion and action. Beyond helping frame conversations and setting an agenda for action, data systems can also show how well solutions are working.

In Newport, Brandt said the pre-k focus began years ago with a study of the implications of brain research. “We saw that the earlier we can get students, the better off we are.” Rather than expanding to take over pre-k delivery, the district has expanded its involvement and leadership among various providers.

Hulefeld said such an approach has many advantages for pre-k providers, not the least of which is opening a window to how the graduates of pre-k programs are faring in school. “There is a huge desire for people who serve children when they are 1 or 2 or 3 to know what’s happened to that kid and how they are doing in school.”

Early Childhood Task Force Delivers Recommendations

Setting common kindergarten readiness targets, developing a model pre-k curriculum and increasing accreditation of local pre-k programs were among the recommendations of a state task force on early childhood development that made its report to Gov. Steve Beshear in December.

“A quality, comprehensive education and development system for our children is the key to Kentucky’s economic success in the future,” the task force said in its report, “Early Childhood Services in Kentucky: A Framework To Ensure School Readiness for Our Students, Schools and Communities.”

The task force recommended state action to:

■ Adopt and distribute the school readiness definition to local communities, schools, state agencies and early childhood advocates.

■ Identify and implement a screening tool for children’s transition and entry into kindergarten, coordinated with other child assessment requirements.

■ Develop a governance model for the system of early childhood services in the Commonwealth.

■ Increase opportunities for, and reduce barriers to, collaboration and coordination at all levels of the early childhood system through provision of technical assistance, use of incentives and development of measures to assess and evaluate collaboration and coordination efforts.

■ Ensure that Early Childhood Standards are widely distributed and used effectively in the programming for high quality child care, early care

and preschool programs, and Head Start, and across the education community, including postsecondary programs.

■ Support the work of KDE in the promotion of a model curriculum framework for public preschools and related review of kindergarten standards.

■ Identify strategies including incentives and other supports to increase participation in the STARS for KIDS NOW program to make it more meaningful to parents.

■ Strengthen the role of the Community Early Childhood Councils by simplifying the grant process and identifying the needs of each local community to determine support for the local council.

In its call for implementing a common screening tool, the task force explained the need for more information on the progress of young children. “Early child assessment should be a tool for coordination, collaboration and transition across a unified system of early childhood,” the task force report said.

It added that a new state screening system should provide information on a child’s strengths or needs for further assessment; information about interventions, and a way to track preparation across the system with feedback to the entire early childhood community.

“A child’s earliest years play a critical role in future achievements,” Beshear said at a press conference announcing the task force’s findings.

FIND OUT MORE: Read the report at workforce.ky.gov/ECTFfinalreport.pdf



PRICHARD COMMITTEE

FOR ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

P. O. Box 1658
Lexington, KY 40588-1658
(859) 233-9849
admin@prichardcommittee.org
<http://www.prichardcommittee.org>