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Dayton closing preschool program Head Start; 33 jobs to be lost

Program's end comes as a study reports Ohio has fallen behind in educating preschoolers.

By [Mary McCarty](#), Staff Writer

Teacher Karetha Burns is one of 33 staffers who will be losing their jobs at the end of the school year with the closing of the Head Start program in the Dayton Public Schools.

Yet she remains a firm believer in the value of early intervention. "It helps children academically and socially, and helps them to help one another," she said.

Both school officials and local Head Start leaders appear confident that the transition will be a smooth one, as most of the 300 preschoolers currently in the program will advance to kindergarten, find another Head Start program locally, or enroll in a preschool program in a Dayton public school.

Early childhood education provides important building blocks for kids, particularly those who don't have a good learning environment in the home. But those programs are at risk because of budget cuts and the sheer demand.

Dayton Public is shutting down its program at a time when Ohio is falling behind in educating at-risk preschoolers, according to a national report card released Monday.

Steve Barnett, author of the study by the National Institute for Early Education, said no other state has slashed preschool funding so dramatically.

"Ohio is imploding when it comes to early childhood education," he said. "It's the result of a dramatic decrease in funding and a dramatic decrease in standards."

Barnett was particularly critical of the maximum of 28 students allowed in Ohio preschools.

“Ratio matters,” he said. “We know that giving students individual attention and working in small groups is what makes preschool very effective. This is pushing the boundaries of warehousing children.”

A low student-to-teacher ratio is one of the hallmarks of Head Start.

“Our kids are getting more attention,” said Mary Burns, CEO of the Miami Valley Child Development Center, the Head Start provider for Montgomery, Clark and Madison counties. “We’re heavily focused on school readiness.”

Karen Lombard, the director of early childhood education for Dayton Public Schools, said that ending the Head Start program is part of the next phase of the district’s building plan, which incorporates two preschools in every building — one for special needs children and one for typically developing children.

“We have more preschool programs than we have space, so we made the decision to go with a Title I preschool in every building,” she explained.

The Miami Valley Child Development Center is asking its regional office for a net reduction of 136 slots to make up for the additional costs in transportation and rental space. Mary Burns said teachers can apply for jobs with the child development center, but they must have a bachelor’s degree.

“Some teachers are very saddened, and there is some resentment, but they carry themselves in very, professional high-quality manner,” said Caroline Smith, director of Head Start for Dayton Public Schools.

Barbara Haxton, executive director of the Ohio Head Start Association, wasn’t surprised by the national report card showing that the quality of Ohio’s publicly funded preschools had plummeted more than any other state. Ohio ranked 36th among 40 states with Head Start programs, compared with a ranking of 19th during the 2001-2002 school year.

Haxton believes that’s largely due to the virtual elimination of state funding for Head Start in 2009, following a precipitous drop in 2004.

“At one point in time we were serving almost all of the eligible 4-year-olds in Ohio,” Haxton said. “We practically had to go looking for kids. Now, we serve about 49 percent of eligible students. The focus is mainly on the neediest children, but the lower middle class isn’t being served.”

That loss was compensated to some extent by federal stimulus money in 2009 which expanded Head Start programs for toddlers and 3-year-olds in many area counties, including Warren, Darke, Miami and Greene. That funding has been continued at least through this year, constituting nearly \$4 million for the Miami Valley Child Development Center, about 20 percent

of the its budget. If that money goes away, the agency, which serves 2,910 children, would lose 379 slots, Burns said.

The situation underscores the vulnerability of Ohio's preschool programs, Barnett said. "The stimulus money is a good thing, but it won't be there forever. If you look at the cuts the House has proposed for 2012, I would be very nervous about the continuation of that money."

That's shortsighted, Barnett believes, noting that early childhood education is known to reduce the future costs of prisons, health care and school failure.

"The Great Lakes states are going to keep losing jobs if we don't have an educated population," he said. "Shanghai, China, has universal preschool. They understand very well that they're competing in the global economy. This is the real trade war, and states like Ohio are disarming."

For the time being, many observers feel optimistic that children won't be affected by the changes in their local Head Start program.

"I don't see too many parents who are upset. Kindergarten children are moving on, and our family service workers are holding meetings so parents will be well-informed about their choices," said Karetha Burns.