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PROGRAM HELPS PREPARE CHILDREN FOR ELEMENTARY EDUCATION



AT THE READY: Students in the Ready for Kindergarten program at Schirle Elementary School listen as teacher Jeanette Johannson reads a story. RON COOPER / Statesman Journal

Kids get leg up on kindergarten

Statistics show young students benefit from preschool programs.

BY SARAH HUNSBERGER
Statesman Journal

In kindergarten, knowing how to be away from your mom or share your crayons is almost as important as learning your ABCs.

But in Salem and around the state, many children are heading



Salem

to kindergarten unprepared because they don't have the chance to attend preschool first, said Debbie Driskill, the Salem-Keizer School District's Community Education coordinator.

The school district is helping fill some of that need. At 13 sites around Salem and Keizer, the district's Ready for Kindergarten and Little Learners programs are making it easier for children — and their parents — to take that first step into kindergarten.

"There's a national trend toward preschool programs as school improvement becomes

Preschool classes

The Salem-Keizer School District's preschool programs follow roughly the same schedule as the school year. There are 13 sites and 250 slots, and registration begins around the end of April or beginning of May.

Parents pay \$44 a month for a two-day-a-week Little Learners program, which is for 3- and 4-year-olds. It's \$64 a month for the three-day Ready For Kindergarten program, which targets children who will enter kindergarten in the next school year. Classes are two hours a day.

For more information, call 399-3121.

more important," Driskill said.

In a January report by the nonprofit advocacy group Children First for Oregon, statistics showed about half of Oregon children without preschool experience are considered "ready to learn" when they enter kindergarten, while almost two-thirds of children who attend preschool are "fully ready to learn."

The area where children struggle the most, according to the report, is sitting still.

The district's preschool programs concentrate on just such challenges. While colors, shapes, letters and numbers are included

in most of the exercises and activities, the broader goal is to get kids used to the routine and structure of the classroom.

The first step is helping kids get used to being away from their parents and teaching them that their parents will always come back.

"They have grown up so much," said Jeanette Johannson, who teaches preschool classes at Schirle Elementary. "When we started, there was a lot of missing mom and dad. Now they don't."

In the classroom, children learn routines that will save their future teachers time. This also helps the children concentrate on learning more important things once they reach kindergarten.

Now that the preschool year is about half over, children know how to line up in straight rows to walk to the restroom.

"That is not an easy task for that age group," Driskill said.

They learn how to wait their turn at tiny chairs and tables as their teacher hands out teddy bear-shaped graham crackers at snack time. One little girl who gets skipped stays perfectly calm until her teacher notices

the mistake.

Meanwhile, the children are using other things they've learned in spite of themselves lining their teddy bears in rows and counting them.

When the classroom gets a little too unruly, Johannson gets their attention with a call-and-response clapping: two slow claps followed by three short ones. The children know the signal, and they mimic the claps in unison, calming down and coming to attention.

Johannson said she tries to keep the preschool routines as close to kindergarten as she can.

"What I've heard anecdotally from the teachers is this is exactly the kind of program they need," Driskill said. "They are that much further along when they come to kindergarten."

Diane Lee of Salem is convinced that the preschool program helps put children in the right frame of mind for kindergarten. Her 5-year-old daughter, Miranda, is in Johannson's class. She's seen her daughter learn the rules as the year has progressed.

"She's just a little bit more comfortable and confident around other little kids," Lee said.