

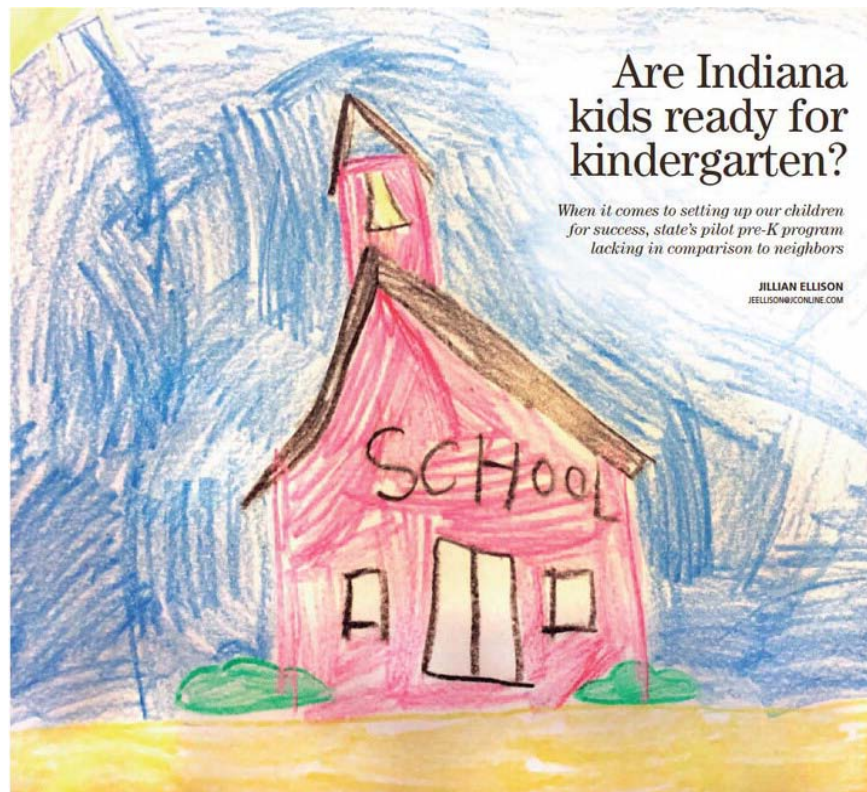
Are Indiana kids ready for kindergarten?

When it comes to setting up our children for success, state's pilot pre-K program lacking in comparison to neighbors

JILLIAN ELLISON

JEELLISON@JCONLINE.COM

If you stick around Julie Grubb's kindergarten classroom long enough, she will break down what a school year looks like. "I always joke that I teach preschool for the first half of the year, and then we move on to kindergarten," Grubb said. "It's interesting because we have such diversity of kids here with cultures and ethnicity, but also with abilities." Grubb, a kindergarten teacher at Miami Elementary School, said expectations for kindergarten have changed. As standards have increased, Indiana lawmakers are grappling with key questions: Should the state fund prekindergarten programs and, if so, by how much? Should all-day kindergarten be a requirement? It was a hot topic in last year's gubernatorial race. Though Gov. Eric Holcomb has proposed an expansion of state-funded prekindergarten, the current program is offered in only five counties in Indiana: Vanderburgh, Marion, Lake, Allen and Jackson.



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In addition to living in one of the five eligible counties, the household income of the child must be in the 127 percentile of the federal poverty level or lower, meaning a single mother of one child couldn't make more than \$20,231 a year.

It's an inconsistent approach that many educators say needs to be rethought.

Providing a foundation

According to the National Institute for Early Education Research, of the 42 states with a state-funded pre-K system, only seven served more than 50 percent of 4-year-olds in the state in 2015. In Indiana, 2,400 children are served under the pilot program. Grubb is among those calling for Tippecanoe to be added to the counties that offer the program.

She said roughly two-thirds of her classroom attended preschool or received some of the needed experience for kindergarten at home.

“There is still that percentage of kids, though, who come in and they don’t know what their name looks like or don’t know how to hold a pencil,” Grubb said. “Those are basic skills.”

With only 2,400 4-year-olds enrolled in its pilot pre-K program, Indiana is significantly outpaced by neighboring states:

- » Michigan: 37,112 children (15th nationally)
- » Illinois: 75,154 children (20th nationally)
- » Kentucky: 18,716 children (21st nationally)
- » Ohio: 11,090 children (36th nationally) Claire Brown, a kindergarten teacher at Mayflower Mill Elementary, said without the foundations developed in preschool, the structure of all-day kindergarten can be grueling.

“Standards have increased a lot, which is good and bad, because if a student hasn’t had pre-schooling beforehand, then they are missing out on all of that play,” Brown said. “Going from nothing to this, I mean, it is a challenge.”

Hitting the ground running

Before the school year begins, school corporations host a “kindergarten round-up” where incoming students are given tests to see if the child knows his or her letters, any sounds, colors, shapes, as well as simple vocabulary.

Grubb said some of the “power standards” expected of a student by the end of the school year are understanding and applying knowledge of print concepts, phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension as a foundation for developing reading skills.

Kim Bowers, principal at Cumberland Elementary School, said the West Lafayette School Corp.’s elementary school sees a large influx of students who speak little to no English.

“It’s just the norm for us,” Bowers said.

Angie Mathewson, a kindergarten teacher at Cumberland, said in those cases the school leans on other students and parents for help with English.

“We recently had a case where a student came in only being able to speak Korean, and I had a parent that was very involved and was able to make a little booklet for the

child to work with, and they even stayed in class for a while to help where needed,” Mathewson said. “We are lucky to be in a community where parents are so helpful, because we all rely on one another all the time.”

Cumberland is one of the few elementary schools left in Indiana that offers a half-day kindergarten class.

While some may question whether full- and half-day students get the same academic opportunities, Bowers said many would be surprised.

“If you were to walk into any first grade classroom here, you would not be able to tell between the students who attended half day and those who went all day,” she said. “If you push out the unnecessary time spent during a full day of class and focus on the social, emotional and academic skills, then it is possible to receive the same education.”

An either/or scenario

Marilyn Redmon, executive director of Right Steps Child Development Center, said when it comes down to it, the issue all around is money.

“We know how hard it is for families to afford child care,” Redmon said. “That is the kind of thing that always worries me; for some, it is they can either feed their children or buy quality child care.”

Right Steps accepts children from ages infant to 4. Redmon said the pressure is on now more than ever before to kick start a child’s education early.

“If you come into one of our classrooms and see all the activity, a lot of people wonder how it is deemed ‘structured,’... but it is,” she said. “This is all what a child needs to develop. They need art, music, rest time, and then they get back up and start all over.”



Kindergarten teacher Claire Brown, background, and her students use iPads to work on a math exercise called “Number of the Day” on Jan. 25 at Mayflower Mill Elementary. The students use the Book Creator app to learn numbers, how to write them and also practice addition and subtraction.



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Ava Franklin, foreground, and other students in Brown's kindergarten class use iPads to work on a math exercise.

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Elizabeth Schlesinger-Devlin, director of Miller Child Development Laboratory School at Purdue University, said research shows gains for children who are in these types of programs.

"When kids with that background go into kindergarten, they'll be better with a routine, have the ability to mediate and solve problems on their own," Schlesinger-Devlin said. "It is much different than being home all day, doing whatever you want. When you put a child in this setting without anything prior, it's a jolt. How do you share? Or what about now having to ask to use the bathroom? Making friends can be just as difficult as well."

She said pre-K supports all of those things and, most importantly, problem solving, something needed in order to successfully learn in a larger setting.

"Impulse control is a big thing," Schlesinger-Devlin said. "How do I not hit my friend beside me when I really want what they want? I'm angry, how do I solve it? You get all that and more with one dose thanks to pre-K."

How do we fund it?

Schlesinger-Devlin said she understands the balancing act of what needs to happen politically, whether that means pre-K funding takes a back burner or not.

"Everyone has their values and priorities, but as an educator, early education is always going to be mine," she said. "If we put money into this, we are going to have a smaller need for retention, lower crime... I mean, it has a lasting effect."

One thing Schlesinger-Devlin said she knows lawmakers have to consider is making a program that is sustainable for education professionals as well as the students it serves.

“There is a high standard when you look at the pay for those educators,” she said. “With a high-quality program comes adequate pay for those with a higher education degree.”

In the meantime, Redmon said she will continue to worry for those children left in the dark.

“I mean, it is awful for parents to be put in that kind of struggling position,” she said. “There are more kids out there than we can see or have the means to see us, and I am always wondering where those kids are or what their futures are going to look like.”



Gisela Clemente, from left, joins Wendy Melcher-Villagomez, 5, and Alaina Hart, 4, as they paint green to represent grass on a large piece of paper Wednesday at Right Steps in Lafayette.

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Contact J& C families and education reporter Jillian Ellison at [je Ellison@jconline. com](mailto:je Ellison@jconline.com). Follow her on Twitter: @JCellison_.