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Pittsfield Public Schools

A significant portion of early childhood education seats in Pittsfield go unused. A state grant is funding efforts to reverse that

By Greg Sukiennik, The Berkshire Eagle

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Nichole Haas leads her preschool class through the end of the day at Pittsfield Head Start in 2023. Head Start is among programs taking part in a collaborative effort to improve access for early childhood education in the city. THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

PITTSFIELD — In education, a strong start doesn't just matter. It's crucial.

With that in mind, Pittsfield Public Schools, in cooperation with Berkshire United Way and early childhood educators, is using a \$250,000 grant to clear obstacles to early childhood classes for city children.

“With this grant, we are not just expanding preschool access — we are creating a stronger, more equitable early learning system,” interim Pittsfield Superintendent Latifah Phillips said of the initiative. “Every child in Pittsfield deserves to enter kindergarten ready to succeed, and this investment allows us to work alongside our community partners to make that a reality.”



Great Barrington is a rural 'child care desert.' A new town committee has sprung up to fix this

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The grant is responding to a pair of troublesome trends: Underutilization of city early education programs, and a lack of readiness identified in incoming kindergartners.

A needs assessment conducted last academic year by consultant SchoolWorks LLC of Southwick found that a significant percentage of seats for three- and four-year-old children in Pittsfield are going unfilled. The assessment identified 1,100 seats for early childhood classes, and a vacancy rate of between 19 and 25 percent.

At the same time, according to the assessment, screening of all incoming kindergartners, conducted by the Pittsfield Public Schools, showed that 52.5 percent scored below desired readiness benchmarks.

A pair of landmark studies shows why that matters.



Lee Youth Association is planning to build a \$5 million preschool on town-owned land

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A 2010 study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation reported that outcomes are better for children who are reading at grade level by third grade — no longer learning to read, but reading to learn. And a 2017 study led by Nobel-winning economist James Heckman found a 13 percent return on investment for every dollar spent on child care from birth through age 5, including increased earning power, better health and less involvement in crime.

The grant, from the Commonwealth Preschool Partnership Initiative, is being administered by the schools, using the Berkshire United Way as its lead agency. The goal is to bring nonprofit agencies and providers together, streamlining the registration process, and providing continuing education and support for educators.



State grants help child care providers stay afloat in Massachusetts, but more is needed to keep costs down for families

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Katherine von Haefen, the interim president and CEO of Berkshire United Way, said she's pleased the grant is "bringing everybody together so that we can be all swimming in the same direction, because at the end of the day, whether you're Kid Zone, or Gladys Allen Brigham or [the] Boys & Girls Club, we're all here to benefit young children and their families."

The SchoolWorks study identified several reasons for children not taking advantage of preschool: A lack of full-day options for working parents; a lack of reliable transportation; tuition costs beyond families' means; difficulty registering children for classes; and families not knowing about or understanding how to access a sometimes complicated system.

Follow-up data collected by Berkshire Educational Resources K-12 indicated that placement lotteries and waitlists limit access for many families, especially those who do not qualify for subsidies and/or cannot afford private programs. BERK12 also found a lack of consistency across programs in terms of quality instruction, qualified staff and communication with families. While some

“In the three- and four-year-old space, it's just hard for many families to find the care that they need during the time that they need, and the affordability of the slots,” von Haefen said. “Unfortunately, high-quality care is expensive, and it's always been a struggle ... the business model, just in general, nationally, is broken within the early childhood system.”



Berkshire providers jumped at the chance for more subsidized child care slots, only to find out the state isn't increasing its total number of slots

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The grant money will pay for a city-wide preschool program coordinator to streamline enrollment and communication, as well as a centralized registration system to make enrollment easier. It will also provide for shared professional development and coaching to improve curriculum and consistency across the city, and expand supports so preschool-aged children with disabilities can learn alongside their peers.

“The grant is to really strengthen the network ... so that when you're out there marketing and talking about availability of program seats, you're talking about the entire Pittsfield ecosystem, not just selling your individual program,” said BERK12 project manager Jake Eberwein.

Providers taking part include Berkshire County Head Start, Kid Zone, Gladys Brigham Community Center, Boys & Girls Club of the Berkshires, and 18 Degrees. Berkshire Community College will collaborate with the partnership as well.

The grant came at the right time, von Haefen said: For the past two years, early childhood education providers have been meeting every month to work on collective solutions and eliminate barriers for families.

“We've had two years of these monthly convenings, building a community and a network of professional educators. And so this [grant] came at a right time where child care educators are really seeing the value of coming together and

sharing services, as opposed to seeing each other as competing for families and for the business,” she said.

It was a natural fit for Berkshire United Way to lead the collective effort, von Haefen said.

“We really care deeply about the nonprofit sector, particularly right now. And in addition to that, we just really believe to our core about the importance of early the early learning system in Berkshire County, and so it all kind of came together quite nicely,” she said.

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