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Head Start of Lane County celebrates national preschool program's 50th anniversary

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A crowd of 3- to 5-year-olds stuck like a magnet to the young woman dressed up as Disney's Elsa — blond braid, sparkling blue dress — who belted out the preschooler's anthem, "Let It Go."

Most of the children knew some of the lyrics; many of the children solemnly delivered every note and syllable.

"Let it go, let it go

"Can't hold it back anymore ..."

The song's unambiguous expression of feeling fit the event Saturday at Alton Baker Park.

It was a celebration of the 50th anniversary of Head Start, a national, comprehensive preschool program that prepares low-income children for kindergarten.

That means building within them the emotional intelligence skills of waiting their turn, taking direction from a teacher, sitting still in a circle and listening to books, asking for help, using words instead of fists — and, "no you don't put your hands all over your friend when you're standing in line," said Annie Soto, 37-year employee and longtime executive director of Head Start of Lane County.

Head Start students learn empathy and how to be kind, she said. "Some do it naturally from watching their parents. Other children have a lot of stress factors."

Monique Moreno said her 4-year-old, Nicolas, learned to express his feelings at Head Start, and it improved his behavior.

"He'll tell me that he's angry and why he's angry — or why he's sad," she said. "That's better than throwing yourself on the floor and kicking and screaming and throwing."

When Head Start children turn 5, they're ready to be good citizens of kindergarten.

Head Start began in 1965 — to give poor children a leg up — as part of President Lyndon Johnson’s war on poverty.

“We set out to make certain that poverty’s children would not be forevermore poverty’s captives,” Johnson said in a Rose Garden ceremony at the White House.

A half-century later, the program continues to grow, although there always seems to be an opponent in Congress who would like to see it converted to school vouchers or some other nonfederal program.

“It’s Head Start’s birthday. How happy should we be?” the Cato Institute grumbled in a recent press release.

Head Start’s 2015 budget is \$8.25 billion, Soto said.

“We’re a big target right now. People want our money, but Republicans and Democrats continue to see the impact in their communities,” so the program endures, she said.

Oregon developed a quarter-century-long enthusiasm for Head Start, allocating a growing pot of state funds to enroll more children.

Today, the state’s Head Start biennial budget is \$127 million. The Legislature is likely to pass a \$10 million boost for Head Start funding this session, Soto said.

Today, Head Start of Lane County helps 1,050 preschool students, and 414 are on waiting lists for entrance to one of 17 centers in Lane County.

The proposed \$10 million would add as many as 72 students to the local roster.

Eric Pakulak, researcher in the Brain Development Lab at the University of Oregon, said significant evidence from research spanning four decades shows that high-quality preschool can improve lives.

Preschool students see better health, better graduation rates, more participation in the labor force and less crime — “great, great benefits for society into adulthood,” Pakulak said.

UO Brain Lab researchers have worked a decade in local Head Start classrooms to study and improve readiness to learn.

The lab and Head Start of Lane County together won a five-year, \$2.1 million federal grant to study stress physiology and brain function in both students and parents.

With the help of researchers, randomly selected Head Start teachers provide their students with a “brain train” program.

It builds attention spans with exercises, for example, that give half the class a detailed task, such as coloring, and give the other half permission to act as Dr. Distractors. With practice, the students learn to ignore the distractors and sustain their focus, Pakulak said.

Teachers give their students a vocabulary for talking about their feelings. Students learn how to moderate their emotions with techniques such as taking a deep breath.

Their parents, in the meantime, go through an eight-week parenting program developed at the Oregon Social Learning Center that teaches the vocabulary that the students are learning and a host of ways to reduce stress in the home.

Before and after the trainings, researchers bring parents and children together to the lab, attach electrodes to measure activities of their hearts and brains — and to create images that reveal the development of attention and emotional regulation.

Parents of Head Start students, whether in the brain study or out, say their children grow emotionally and intellectually right before their eyes.

Dave Garrett said his 4-year-old daughter, Shannon, has hyperactivity and also pica, a disorder that causes her to eat nonfood items.

“They’re teaching her how to sit and to just eat food,” he said. “She’s still busy, but they help her with that.”

Shellbie Walters said her daughter Charlie, 5, wasn’t very social. “She didn’t like a lot of people. She’s the class helper now. The teacher asks her to do things.”

Leslie Smith’s two elder daughters attended an exclusive preschool, but the family’s circumstances have changed and her youngest daughter, Emma, is at Head Start.

“We spent a lot of money there, but this has been far more beneficial,” Smith said, adding “she sings songs all day when she’s not at school, and they’re songs she learned there.”

William Fogelquist’s daughter, Izabella, is a Head Start alumna.

“When she got to kindergarten, she knew how to behave and listen to the teacher,” he said, “keep her attention more focused on school.”

Izabella is 11 now, and a fifth-grader at Irving Elementary, he said. “She does fantastic in school. She’s at the top of her class,” he said.

Isabel and Robert Streets said their 3-year-old Olivia made tremendous gains her first year.

“She’s made lots of new friends. She loves her teachers. She’s always excited to go.

“It’s given her a true love of going to school.”