



# Educators set sights on expanding preschool opportunities

[At Kaw Valley schools, kids can attend two years of free pre-K](#)

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By Celia Llopis-Jepsen

ROSSVILLE — On a Wednesday afternoon at Rossville Grade School, nine preschoolers sit on a rug around their teacher, Diana Gulley. They are doing a good job of concentrating on her lesson about spring.

“What’s something we like to do outside when it’s windy?” Gulley asks, drawing a swift response from a 4-year-old in a hot pink sweater, rocking back and forth on her knees: “Fly a kite!”

This is “circle time” in Gulley’s class. The preschoolers spend plenty of time playing, too.

“Really, playing is kind of our learning,” Gulley says, adding that it teaches social skills, such as sharing and taking turns.

A few minutes earlier, the class was learning by singing — first, the days of the week, to the tune of “The Addams Family,” followed by a months-of-the-year Macarena that ended with kids collapsing in giggles as the tune sped up and they tried to dance along.

This classroom is part of Kaw Valley Unified School District 321’s universal half-day preschool program. In Kaw Valley, parents can place their children in preschool at the age of 3, and most do. By the time they start kindergarten, most of the district’s 5-year-olds have already attended two years of early education.

This week, as discussion about K-12 funding continued in the Legislature, it became clear that Gov. Sam Brownback’s proposal to fund all-day kindergarten across the state wouldn’t come to fruition this year. But most Kansas districts will continue to fund the kindergarten costs from elsewhere in their budgets, and some will forge ahead with initiatives to expand voluntary preschool.

Kaw Valley, a rural school system with four buildings and 1,200 students, is one of the rare districts that has offered universal preschool for years. Nearby, Topeka USD 501 is hoping a

bond issue will pass next month that would pay in part to expand prekindergarten. The Kansas State Board of Education, meanwhile, would like to see all children have access to pre-K education regardless of family income.

At Kaw Valley, 3-year-olds attend morning preschool from 8 to 11 a.m.. Four-year-olds arrive around noon and stay till 3:20 p.m. The kids also can eat breakfast and lunch there, and some do. For those with developmental delays in speech or motor skills, there is access to the elementary's occupational and speech therapists. For those with other special needs, there is time with teachers one-on-one.

### **Paying the bills**

Serving students in this manner is resource intensive. There are only about 10 children per class, and six preschool teachers are needed to cover 12 half-day sections of preschool. Each class has at least one paraprofessional, and more are added based on special needs.

To cover these costs, Kaw Valley uses a mixture of funds, but first and foremost relies on a grant from the Children's Cabinet — money that comes from tobacco companies through a lawsuit settlement.

Last year, the district spent \$520,000 on preschool, superintendent Kerry Lacock estimates. That included salaries, transportation, supplies and some capital costs that aren't annual, such as playground equipment. The grant paid a little more than \$300,000 of the expenses. Some came from special education funds, state aid for serving disadvantaged children, and the district's general operating budget. Parents, meanwhile, pay an enrollment fee of \$30.

Lacock considers it a worthwhile investment.

“Brownback wants higher fourth-grade reading scores,” he said. “We do, too. Early-childhood education is a great way to go about it.”

The district braids its preschool together with other programs. Parents as Teachers serves families with children up to age 3, offering health and educational resources. Head Start offers similar resources once they are in preschool.

The result, says Rossville Grade School principal Ann McCullough, is a model that readies all children for kindergarten, regardless of family income or special needs.

“These kids are comfortable coming to their neighborhood schools,” McCullough said. “Everybody reaps the benefits.”

### **The preschool**

#### **question**

Expanding public preschool has become a national debate. A few states, such as Oklahoma and Georgia, have rolled out universal or nearly universal access to pre-K, and President Barack Obama has called for a higher tax on tobacco products to fund more early education.

But not everyone is sold on more preschool. While many educators and child advocacy groups are enthusiastic, skeptics point to the massive investment needed to fund quality preschool on a large scale and question whether early education is developmentally appropriate for such young kids.

Analysts at the libertarian think tank Cato Institute also argue large-scale public programs, such as Head Start, aren't high quality, pointing to a 2012 study as showing the program didn't produce academic gains lasting more than a few years.

They also question the methodology used in studies that concluded preschool offers a wide array of long-term benefits, arguing they were based on specific, intensive programs that included more services than just preschool.

Advocates, meanwhile, accuse critics of misrepresenting the research, including the Head Start study, which they say shows Head Start achieved its purpose of preparing kids for kindergarten. Moreover, they cite longitudinal research as showing early-childhood programs pay off many times over in the long run by cutting dropout rates and crime and boosting the number of college graduates and family incomes.

In Kaw Valley, scores on state mathematics, science and reading tests were generally up last year among students who had attended the preschool and were now old enough to take state tests, compared to students a few years earlier who hadn't had the preschool access. Yet it is difficult to know what factors may have contributed to this.

Proponents also say increasing kindergarten readiness is crucial to helping eliminate educational disparities for minorities and low-income students.

That is one reason USD 501 has been expanding preschool at its elementaries in recent years, Topeka school board president Janel Johnson said.

"It's giving our students the chance to get those building blocks in place," Johnson said.

The district serves less than half as many preschoolers as each year's incoming class of kindergarteners, but is proposing to increase capacity by turning Shaner Elementary into a preschool.

### **Year by year**

As Gulley's students continued to learn about spring — the theme for the week — she planned to take them outdoors to plant flowers with help from one of their grandparents.

She is grateful, she said, that this program is open to every child in the district.

But funding isn't certain. Kaw Valley's grant is awarded on a year-by-year basis, meaning there is always a risk of losing it someday. If that happened, Lacock said, administrators would do all they could to avoid charging parents.

"We would have to find a way to keep it running," he said. "We would try really hard."

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