

# Niagara Falls School District is serious about pre-k

Falls district asks parents of those in full day pre-k program to commit

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Photos by Michele DeLuca/staffPre-k 3 teacher Trish Hennegan stands over a group of 3- and 4-year-old children doing purposeful play in her classroom at Harry F. Abate Elementary School.



Pre-k teacher Trish Hennegan talks to one of her students, Jaida B., in an Abate Elementary School pre-k 3 class. Jaida B., 4, is one of the students in Trish Hennegan's pre-k 3 class at Abate Elementary who is expected to benefit from early enrollment in elementary school.

There's good news and bad news about an unusual all day pre-kindergarten program which gives 2- to 4-year-olds in the city a substantial boost when it's time to start kindergarten.

The bad news first: The program has the highest absentee numbers of any other grade in the district.

This past school year, Superintendent of Niagara Falls Schools Mark Laurrie has hired five social workers to contact and visit the families of the young children who repeatedly missed their pre-k classes. About 86 percent of the 3- and 4-year-olds missed multiple days of instruction.

Laurrie said there is also a very positive aspect to the pre-k story, which began three years ago.

"The positive part is there is no district in New York state or maybe the county that currently has 140 2- and 3-year-old kids in school," he said.

He says standardized test data shows that the first 40 kids who have completed first grade show improvement in their English language arts area. "We're seeing gains of 31 percent higher than the kids that didn't attend at that age."

There were seven pre-k classes this recently completed school year.

This past year, while there were around 500 students enrolled in kindergarten, there were 328 students enrolled in the pre-k programs and an additional 62 pre-k students enrolled in community-based programs.

That's a total of near 400 students getting advance instruction to ease their way into kindergarten, but the attendance in the school district's pre-k needed to be addressed, Laurrie said.

More often than in any other grade, parents and guardians did not send their 2-, 3- and 4-year-olds to school on a regular basis.

"We frequently get the followings answers as to why: 'It's not mandatory,' 'It's only pre-k,' and 'We can't get a bus for my 3-year-old if the sibling doesn't go to school. We thought we were doing something great by including those children and we are,'" Laurrie explained, adding that when the absentee rates got so high he decided to hire the social workers to explain to families the benefits of the program.

Tiffany Nalls-Ford is one of the social workers who contacts parents and visits homes when there is a pre-k attendance issue.

"I let them know I'm advocating on their behalf, and that I'm here to assist them in any way I can," she said. "I tell them there are concerns about (their) child's attendance. Is there any way we can help?" For a lot of parents, it's a transportation issue, because of laws requiring children 3 and under to be in car seats and school buses don't have car seats.

However, parents who sign up for the pre-k program must commit, regardless, said Diane Bianco, assistant principal at Abate who has been overseeing the pre-k program.

"This is a full-day program, you can't just come and go as you please," Bianco continued, noting, "You sign up for your academic career to begin."

The programs offered are a bit different than those in grades kindergarten through 6, said Lynne Tompkins, principal at Abate. The kids go from 8:45 a.m. to 3 p.m. five days a week and spend their days in purposeful play. There are also mental health counselors to teach the children programs for emotional growth and development including "Too Good for Violence," "Good Touch, Bad Touch," and "Stranger Danger."

But overall, Tompkins, who came to Abate from Niagara Falls High School, said that she is very impressed with the pre-k program and noted that teachers will be gathering during the summer to assess test scores of students in the pre-k program to get a more specific understanding of the impact of early enrollment.

Teachers and administrators already know the program is creating better students. "It's such a wonderful program,"

Tompkins said. "If you would see the children from September to now, it's just amazing. And the teachers are wonderful as to how they care for them. They love them."

One parent, Patricia Beckett, who has custody of two of her grandchildren and enrolled them in the pre-k program at Abate said her grandchildren have benefitted greatly.

"These two were taken from their mom and they didn't trust anyone," Beckett said. "When they walked into school they were crying and they were constantly in need of somebody. The teachers there would grab them and hold them and hug them. They went out of their way."

The positive results for her grandchildren were apparent at the end of the school year. "They've become two different kids," she said. "They love kids. I've never seen a school do that."