

Herald & Review

Macon County makes progress in education with challenge

Several months ago, York Powers, Kindergarten Readiness Coordinator for the Decatur Area Education Coalition, wrote to the Herald & Review about *The Brigrance Challenge* and the goal of achieving 70 percent kindergarten readiness among more than 700 preschoolers who will enter kindergarten in Decatur public schools in August 2009. I am pleased to report the results of the challenge. The Decatur public schools screened more than 690 children about to enter kindergarten. Our preschoolers scored significantly higher this year, compared to last year. Last year, only 34 percent were ready; this year, 61 percent are ready! The number of preschoolers ready for kindergarten nearly doubled.

Although we did not quite meet the challenge of 70 percent, our improvement is nonetheless significant. The average Brigrance score improved during one year from 55.5 to 67.8 points.

So how did we, as a community, raise our children's scores? First, we acknowledged that having only 34 percent of our children ready for kindergarten was too low. Then, we developed a plan.

As a community, all child care and preschool providers met to identify specific areas where our children needed the most learning assistance. Next, we provided professional development for our child care providers.

We met four times this year with teachers from day care and preschool centers, as well as from home day cares. The topics of our professional development sessions included math and reading lessons, fine motor skill development, speech and language development and music and movement. Parents were invited and encouraged to participate, and more than 300 people did. Teachers and parents learned to increase children's academic development with a variety of tools easily at hand during a normal day.

This summer, we held Kindergarten Readiness Camp for more than 150 children. The prekindergarteners spent four hours a day learning to write their names, recognize numbers, letters and colors and identify simple words, all in the company of exotic zoo animals and nature's sights and sounds.

The camp was held July 13 through 31. Groups of young learners rotated between Rock Springs Nature Center and Scovill Zoo. Literacy, math and motor skills were woven into every teachable moment, from outdoor walks, where the challenge was to look for nature's treasures that started with the letter "b," to hopping and "ribbiting" like a frog during circle time. With the help of four Decatur public school lead teachers, 16 group teachers and additional park and conservation assistants, our young learners experienced nature while learning and having fun.

Of the camp slots available, priority "recruiting" was targeted to preschoolers who scored the lowest on the Brigrance. Thanks to in-kind donations, several small grants and generous contributions, there was no cost to attend the camp. The Children's Museum, Decatur Park District and Macon County Conservation District generously made their facilities available.



Dr. Irma Brooks (above), Executive Director of Decatur Area Education Coalition since February, 2009.

Breakfast and lunch were provided, and campers were bused from their homes to the camp sites.

The camps exuded energy and excitement. Math lessons complemented art lessons. For example, after holding his hand in green paint and placing it on construction paper for the count of five, a young artist created a treetop. Dipping his elbow in brown paint and holding it again for the count of five produced a tree trunk! One camp teacher queried her students by asking “When you have circle time in kindergarten, what will you say you did this summer?” The answer came back in unison: “That we went to Kindergarten Camp and our group was the Cheetahs!”

Because literacy is an important skill that children begin to acquire at this age, four literacy teachers from Decatur public schools conducted reading lessons at every opportunity. As Powers said, “Our teachers were phenomenal. They were willing to go outside the regular classroom and use nature’s classroom as the centerpiece to teaching children.”

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EFFORTS
TO PUSH
TOWARD
A BRIGHTER
FUTURE!**

Although we are proud of our achievements this year, the hard work is now beginning. The Brigrance Challenge is expected to grow and advance. Percentages will be raised every year, with the ultimate goal of 100 percent kindergarten readiness among Macon County preschoolers within three years.

Ensuring that every child enters kindergarten with the skills necessary to learn and succeed is essential and the first step if our community is to reach its goal of becoming one of the most educated communities in our state. As a community, our efforts are pushing us toward a brighter future, and I invite every Decatur resident to join me and our teams in the quest.

Irma Brooks is executive director of the Decatur Area Education Coalition. For more information on the coalition, call 429-3000 or e-mail the coalition at edco@endowdecatur.org.

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