

School-based preschool would prepare at-risk kids

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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Dist. 20 school board will have final say.

The possibility of public preschool in Gothenburg is gaining momentum.

At a meeting for District 20 Stakeholders on Feb. 3 at Gothenburg Public Library, school administrators discussed school-based preschool for what school officials refer to as at-risk youngsters. (See information box.)

Stakeholders are Gothenburg residents who are invited to meetings on different educational topics and are asked to share that information with other community members.

Superintendent Mike Teahon told about 25 Stakeholders that the administration plans to apply for a Nebraska Department of Education grant this week which would help fund the program for three years.

The district applied for and was denied a grant for a preschool program in June of 2009.

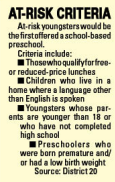
School board to decide

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That doesn't mean the district will go ahead with the program, Teahon said, as District 20 school board members will likely decide whether or not to do it during their March 8 meeting.



If members decide not to proceed, he said district officials will withdraw the application.

Teahon said his personal philosophy is that if children are not at a certain educational and skill level when they start kindergarten, they will never catch up.

"If they're behind, it's almost impossible," he said, noting that many other schools the size of District 20—like Cozad—already offer public preschool.

Teahon added that a committee has explored the topic for about a year—meeting with private preschool and child-care providers, teachers, parents and others in the community.

Of this year's kindergarteners surveyed in the district, about 20% did not attend preschool, according to Teresa Messersmith, K-2 principal and special education co-director.

Messersmith said kindergarten teachers notice a discrepancy between students who have attended preschool and those who haven't.

For example, Jim Widdifield—Dudley principal grades 3-6—said some youngsters don't know the alphabet when they start kindergarten while some can write it out.

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Research: Preschool helps

The National Institute of Education Research shows from 123 studies over several decades that the impact of early childhood education reduces achievement gaps since preschool has a substantial impact on cognitive and social/emotional development.

Quoting Steven Barnett, the director of the National Institute for Early Education Research, Messersmith said children who attend a high-quality preschool enter kindergarten with better pre-reading skills, richer vocabularies and stronger basic math skills.

More research reveals that money spent on preschool is the best strategy for keeping up America's competitive position in the world market, Messersmith.

"The return on every dollar spent on preschool is \$7.16—and even higher," she said.

Messersmith pointed out that such a program in the district would target students who don't have access to preschool whether it be financial or other reasons.

More teachers needed

With the go-ahead for a school-based preschool program, Messersmith said the district would employ a certified teacher for 20 students plus a paraeducator to insure a ratio of one adult to 10 children.

FINANCIAL PROPOSAL					
If the District 20 school board goes ahead with plans to offer a school-based preschool, estimated finances for a year would be:					
	NDE grant	IDEA funds	Headstart	Dist. 20	Parent fees
Share	\$8,576	15%	2%	\$8,576	7%
Total	\$80,000	\$30,000	\$4,000	\$80,000	\$8,000

A parent/community advisory group has already been formed as part of the NDE grant requirement.

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Partnerships with people and businesses in the community have also been fostered, Widdifield said.

When asked about space for public preschool, Messersmith said they've discussed different options "without crowding kids."

A kindergarten room and another with access to the outside have been considered in addition to a former rural school north of town and buildings in the community including churches.

Widdifield said the program is geared toward at-risk students because of grant requirements.

Messersmith said officials are also trying to identify families who couldn't afford to send their children to a community preschool.

Current providers included

Officials said they have talked to preschool and day care providers in the community about the proposal, noting that two are on the committee.

Teahon said they don't want to ruin a provider's livelihood.

"We want consistency because they can't take on the entire burden," he said.

One stakeholder suggested that the committee review why certain children are not in preschool, noting that she knows of two families whose children are not enrolled and who are not at risk.

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Tim Strauser, a member of the preschool planning committee, said transportation was the biggest reason parents don't send their children to preschool.

"That's why a lot of people send their kids to kindergarten early," Strauser said.

If District 20 receives the grant, it would pay 36.5% of the cost each year for the first three years.

Federal sources and parental fees would pay for about 27% of the cost with District 20 picking up the remainder or 36.5%.

After the third year, Teahon said state aid would finance part of the program in addition to Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and other funds.

Plan may not be funded

He added that the odds of Dist. 20 receiving the grant are not that good because the poverty level isn't as high as other districts.

Teahon said 68 preschools in the state are now funded with six preschool grants given last year.

Several Stakeholders said they think there's a need for school-based preschool that should be provided whether or not the district receives the grant.

"But we have to move in a way that doesn't negatively affect the private providers," Teahon said.

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