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Alliance preparing students for success through fun and games



Incoming kindergarteners show their parents what they've learned on Aug. 11, 2016, after attending four weeks of the Family Success Alliance kindergarten readiness program at New Hope Elementary. A second readiness program was held at Carrboro Elementary School. **Tammy Grubb** tgrubb@newsobserver.com

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CHAPEL HILL - Gavin Fisher sat at a small table with his mom, dad and baby sister Jade, flipping through a book about animals.

“(School) was fun. I loved it,” he said, looking up briefly to answer a question. The best part was reading books, he added.

“We’ve been reading to him ever since he would sit down and let us read with him,” dad Frank Fisher said.

This summer, Gavin joined 89 other students for the Family Success Alliance kindergarten-readiness program. The four-week program, in its second year, helped him with his fine motor skills and also gave him important time with other kids his age, mom Stephanie Fisher said.

“We’ve definitely noticed some growth with him,” she said.

The students learned to ride the bus and get along with others. They shared breakfast, practicing manners and how to carry a cafeteria tray. Mornings were spent reading and working on phonics and vocabulary skills. After recess, they turned to numbers, counting and math.

“They’ve learned how to share, which is hard, and how to take turns, which is challenging,” said Ambra Wilson, assistant principal of New Hope Elementary School. “They’ve learned through fun and games, and how to be brave and show what they know.”

Income gap

Orange County continues to have one of the state’s highest levels of income equality, meaning more money is in the hands of fewer people, reports show. The poverty level hovers at roughly 17 percent, and one in every five children lacks regular access to adequate or nutritious food.

Roughly 34 percent of local students qualify for free and reduced-price school lunches, a common poverty measure.

The county responded in 2014 by creating the Family Success Alliance, a cradle to career or college pipeline of government and community resources. Alliance partners work with Chapel Hill-Carrboro and Orange County teachers to identify lower-income children who might benefit from the program.

The program is available in two zones but could be expanded in the future to other parts of the county. Zone 6 covers the area from downtown Chapel Hill-Carrboro southwest to N.C. 54, while Zone 4 serves central Orange County and parts of Hillsborough.

Last year's pilot kindergarten class served 66 students in three schools, with eight students to one teacher. The group was tested before and after the program on book and print awareness, letter recognition, counting, number recognition, and their ability to follow routines consistently.

Test results showed a growth of 9 percent proficiency to 67 percent proficiency in literacy, math, and social and emotional skills, FSA officials reported. Teachers also reported seeing students achieve moderate to substantial gains, while 84 percent of parents said children were better prepared for kindergarten.

A new partnership with UNC's Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute could provide more data this year. The institute's researchers tested 63 students during the program's first and fourth weeks, including 41 Spanish-speaking students.

They measured early reading and math skills, asked students to play a game that tested their ability to pay attention, and required teachers to rate their academic, social and attention skills, officials said. A report on the initial results is expected later this year.

Reading skills

The Alliance also added a first-grade readiness class this summer focused on reading and vocabulary skills. While teachers still read to the class, the first-graders spent more time reading by themselves and talking with their teacher about what they read.

It's an important foundation for learning as students advance, teachers said.

"By the end of kindergarten, they're supposed to reach a level D text (with longer words and complex sentences), so you start learning about reading concepts and reading behaviors," teacher Luis Rios said. "In first grade, they have to read text with a lot of high-frequency words and then respond to it in writing. A lot of kids are getting stuck there."

The program also encourages parents to get involved by reading to their child each week and talking daily about what they learned in class.

"You are your child's best advocate," Wilson said. "That goes for this camp and that goes for when they start school, so the more informed you are, the more involved you are in school, the better the experience is going to be for your student."

Expectations for young students are higher now, first-grade teacher Johanna Johnson said, and those who lack an early foundation can quickly fall behind.

“I think they’ll be further along and better prepared than had they been sitting at home all summer not engaged,” Johnson said. “There’s no proof of that, but the study is going to track it ... and hopefully see (how) the trajectory they’ve been on compares with 30 peers who are demographically similar but didn’t have the program.”

Her daughter Kimberly, 6, is excited about school, mom Lourdes Ruiz said. The New Hope first-grader speaks English and Spanish and is a talented artist, she said.

Kimberly confirmed coloring is her favorite subject. Her favorite colors: “Yellow and red and green and black and white.”

“She likes to come every day, and she learned a lot,” Ruiz said. “She’s very happy, she has more friends, and she knows new teachers.”

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