

How important is preschool?

Alabama ranked 45th in nation in potential success for children; lack of preschool education listed as major factor

By Dee Ann Campbell
The Choctaw Sun

BUTLER – To send them or not to send them ... it's the question asked by parents of preschoolers throughout the country. Whether or not to enroll their children in a preschool program is a crucial decision for parents of children ages 3-5.

In Alabama, the answer is often 'no'.

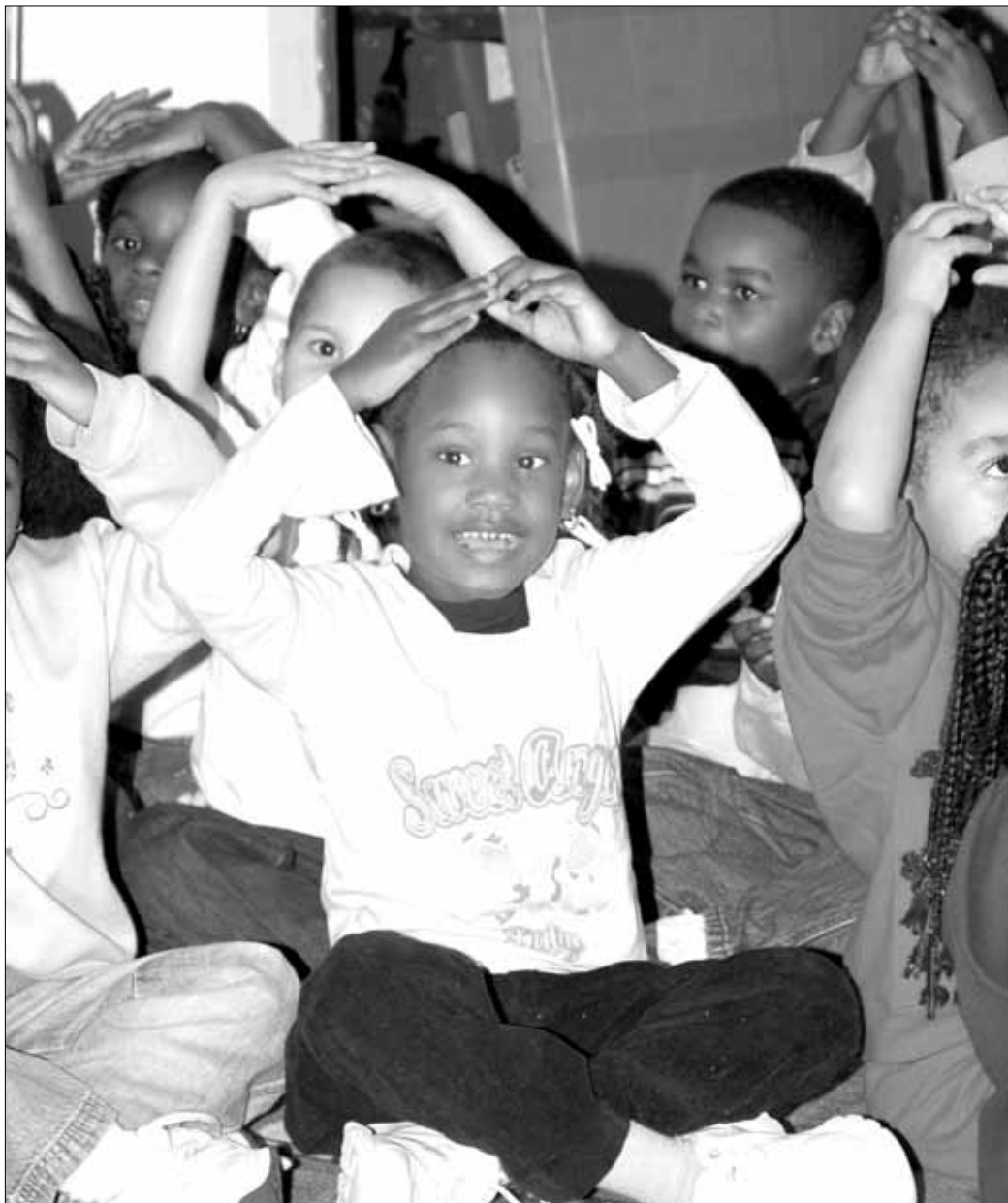
According to the Quality Counts 2007 report by Education Weekly magazine released this month, only 42.1% of Alabama's 3- and 4-year-olds are enrolled in preschool, compared with the national average of 44.8%.

And according to the report, that lack of preschool education is one reason why the state was ranked 45th in the nation when it comes to giving children a chance for success.

The study ranks all 50 states using 80 factors from birth to college that could potentially determine the chance for success for young people who grow up there. Among the factors are low birth weight, poverty rates, educational assessment results, high school dropout rates, and preschool attendance.

Though there are differing schools of thought as to the importance of educational programs for preschoolers, there is some evidence that suggests that, at least for some children, learning at home prior to Kindergarten works well. But for many others, programs that teach social, behavioral, and academic skills are much needed.

In Choctaw County, about 80 children are currently enrolled in the two locations of Head Start. Another 50 to 60 are enrolled in preschool programs at private schools



Choctaw Sun file photo
Preschoolers at Golden Achievement Childcare in Mt. Sterling show off their nursery rhyme skills during Senator Jeff Sessions visit to the center last November.

and childcare centers in the county.

Although Alabama ranks low in offering preschool education, it is one of 38 states that provide at least some state-financed preschool for children.

But according to a local preschool provider, it's not nearly enough.

"The state needs to help more financially," says Thelma Taylor, director of Golden Achievement Childcare Center in Mt. Sterling. "Every child needs to be enrolled in a good program that actually teaches them. From birth to 5 is where they are making half of their mistakes in Alabama."

At Golden Achievement, a total of 18 four-year-olds now attend a new state-funded program designed to ready them for Kindergarten. According to Taylor, it is a step in the right direction for the state in order to help local

preschoolers get a jump-start on their education.

"When they leave here, they know all their letters, sounds, numbers from 1 to 100," says Taylor. "They are even sounding out words. That's what should happen before Kindergarten."

Taylor adds that they should also know such things as nursery rhymes, how to put stories in sequence, and learn what is expected of them in the classroom.

According to Taylor, most of the 4-year-olds who left her program last year were able to begin school armed with basic reading skills, with some already reading on higher levels. Most were able to recognize and write their numbers, with some already performing basic addition.

Taylor's premise that preschool education is necessary is backed up by some recent studies.

by Rutgers University, and by a team of researchers at the University of Wisconsin. The studies concluded that early education of children, especially those with certain disadvantages, produce a variety of positive results, including greater achievement when they reach elementary and high school, less grade retention, a reduced need for special education at a later age, and even less crime.

Proponents of increased preschool attendance often cite the existence of a variety of government-funded programs in other countries. In France and Italy, for example, almost all 3-5 year olds are enrolled in publicly funded preschool. In the United Kingdom, preschool education is fully funded by the government and is generally available to all children over age 3.

In the United States,

most kindergarten teachers feel that knowing letters and numbers is not crucial for school readiness because they teach children these skills in kindergarten.

But research indicates that children who have mastered certain skills in preschool are more likely to learn to read, write, and learn more advanced math skills earlier and more proficiently than those who have not.

The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS) by the National Center for Education Statistics found that only about 29% of children who enter kindergarten can do more than recognize letters by name and can associate them with sounds at the beginning of words. Only seventeen percent can associate letters with sounds at the end of words, and about 2% begin kindergarten able to read simple sight words. Only about 1% are able to read more complex words in sentences.

When it comes to math, only about 20% of beginning kindergartners can do more than count and read single-digit numbers. Only 4% begin kindergarten able to solve addition and subtraction problems.

A large percentage of the children who have mastered such skills have learned them through educational programs in a preschool center.

By contrast, there are some children who enter Kindergarten with higher reading and math skills than others, yet have not attended preschool at all. Rather, they are taught at home by family members who invest large amounts of time in the early education of their preschoolers.

Many psychologists agree that, under the best circumstances, home-care is a preferred option for many children because it tends to give them a positive self-concept and a greater feeling of adjustment. For families who place much emphasis on faith and religious beliefs, home-care of preschoolers – and homeschooling throughout the educational process – can be the option that works best in their situations.

But according to data from the ECLS, some families have risk factors that make teaching preschoolers at home less promising.

Several family risk factors have repeatedly

been associated with low performance in school, even in the lowest grades. These risk factors include having parents who have not completed high school and coming from a low-income or welfare-dependent family. They also include living in a single-parent family and having parents who speak a language other than English in the home.

Research has found that children who have one or more of these characteristics are more likely to be educationally disadvantaged or have difficulty in school from the time they enter Kindergarten.

Although not all children with these risk factors do poorly in school, for those who fall into these categories, the advantages offered by preschool education can be crucial.

But unfortunately, the children who are most at-risk are typically less likely to get preschool education.

For example, in 2005, children ages 3 to 5 who were from families above the poverty level were 13% more likely to participate in center-based programs than poor children, according to the ECLS. In addition, a greater percentage of children whose mothers had college degrees participated in center-based programs than children whose mothers had less than a high school diploma.

Regardless of whether they attend preschool programs or learn at home – and regardless of the risk factors present in their families – experts agree that children need to have been exposed to certain basic skills before entering school if they are going to be successful.

For children in Choctaw County, and throughout the state of Alabama, preschool education in any form possible could be the key to giving a greater potential for success for the children who live here.

"Most of all, we need to make the children lovers of books," Taylor says. "They need to see books as their friends and want to read them every chance they get. Reading is the key to being intelligent. Give them a book and they'll learn."

"Giving them a good start," she adds, "gives them a desire to keep learning for the rest of their lives."

Honor roll, citizenship listings for Southern Choctaw Elementary

GILBERTOWN – Here is the Southern Choctaw Elementary School honor roll for the second nine-weeks grading period:

"A" honor roll, grades 3-6 – Breana Daniels, Jacob McGrew, Mallarie Mosley, Madison Elmore, Taylor McIlwain, Kathryn Roberts, Aaron Sikes, Kelsey Lewis, Monique Napier, Lawrence Linder, Asya Bell, Braxton Betts, Jaleel McCarter, Crystal Chapman, John Phillips, Ransom Phillips, Kristina Powe, Darby Shepherd, Jared Sikes, Mikaela Utsey, Jana Bonner, Cade Kelly, JaKenta Kirksey, Gil Logan, Jenna Presley, Michaela Dew

"B" honor roll, grades 3-6 – Christian Adams, Kendra Anderson, Amber Covington, William Dixon, Abigail Franks, Gabrielle Frost, Brandon Gray, Madison Johnson, Ben Phillips, Tyler Powe, Nathan Soper, Eric Taylor, Shaunya Wallace, Luther Causey, Amber Grayson, Paresha Manuel, Traye McDonald, Thomas McGrew, Caroline Barefield, Tamara Campbell, Madalyn Kelly, Taylor Lolley, Trevor May, Tabitha Tyson, Maria Coody, Destiny Johnson, Brandy Rankins, Whitney Whittington, Bailey Davidson, Joshua Booth,

Kristen Buchanan, Chelsea Cunningham, Austin James, Taylor Kirksey, Sha'Meka Napier, Kaleigh Russ, Shane Stromme, Matt Gilliland, Tristan Gray, Nick McGrew, Margi McMillian, Mallori Tindle, Skyler Biggs, Iesha Bonner, Precious Manuel, Andrew Murray, Keyonna Thornton, Casey Turner, Brandon Dew, Tatiana Hummer, Armani Osborne, Scarlet Tindle, Kayla Bonner, Sawyer Jones, Adam Wilson, Brooke Wilson, Savannah Hare, Alisha Mosley, Imani Powe, Taylor Tyson, Cheyenne Lolley, Sha'leka Napier, Quentin Adams, Joshus Gallet, Jasmiine Grayson, Courtney Jenkins, DeMonika Johnson, Patrick McDougal, Mary McIlwain, Justin Abston, Tiffany Gibson, Claudia Grace, Jesse Harris, Ebony Nelson, Shannon Pearson, David Phillips, Cordarius Simon, and Colton Turner.

Citizenship Awards, Grades K-6 – Britney Daniels, Kendal Turner, Breana Lewis, La'Sonte Coleman, Janacia Dailey, Adam Gray, Lauren Diamond, Cameron Chapman, Keyonna Amoo, Dalton McKenzie, Jada Howard, Jacob Etheridge, Hailey McGee, Drew Whittington, Lily

Johnson, Mikayla James, Shanya Gibson, Austin Henderson, Brenita Thornton, Tyler Chapman, Michala Etheridge, Matthew Hill, Lakesha Bonner, Kaleb Long, Xzavier Thompson, Jordan Stokely, Madison Elmore, Aaron Sikes, Tashia Mason, Dustin Turner, Monique Napier, Brett Boykin, Chastity Mazingo, Robert Leger,

Madison Kelly, Jackson Dalrymple, Kristina Powe, John Phillips, Casey Turner, Andrew Murray, Jana Bonner, Cade Kelly, Brooke Wilson, Caleb Adams, Imani Powe, Darron Grayson, Cheyenne Lolley, Chad Hill, Shakira Bonner, Matthew Mosley, Abbey Shepherd, Telvin Kirksey, T'Arria Mitchell, and David Phillips.

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