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# State's pre-K programs going strong

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It's no secret that a sluggish Alabama economy is forcing new plans for the state's educational system - pre-kindergarten programs included.

In 2008, Gov. Bob Riley's plan for expanding state-funded pre-K programs to more than 20,000 of the state's 4-year-olds by 2011 changed course. Riley's proposal was a three-year, \$80 million plan that would have required the state Legislature to triple the pre-school budget at the beginning of the fiscal 2009 budget year. Revenue shortfalls, however, made an expansion of such proportion an impossibility.

The slowdown forced a 12.5 percent proration in the Education Trust Fund. Riley used half of the state's rainy day fund to reduce cuts to education to 9 percent.

Department of Children's Affairs Commissioner Marquita Davis said Riley's position, and that of her office, is that the program must keep growing and, "what we're doing well, we need to keep doing."

"We were cut because of proration and we prorated all our programs, but this year, we don't have the earmarks on our money that we'd had the year before, which helped tremendously," Davis said.

Despite the economy, the pre-K program was funded at just more than \$19 million, about \$1.3 million over last year's appropriation.

In addition, there are federal stimulus dollars going into Title One schools that may be used in pre-K classes.

The state's Office of School Readiness that oversees the programs and provides training and technical expertise reports that 27 new sites were funded this year. There were more than 100 requests.

The sites are in public and private schools as well as faith-based schools, Head Start centers and child care centers.

Officials with the Office of School Readiness say there's a strong need for more pre-K centers in north Alabama. It is estimated that only about 5 percent of the eligible 4-year-old children are being served.

Children must be 4 years old on or before Sept. 1 of the current year to be eligible. Unlike the state's Head Start programs, there are no income requirements.

There are 185 programs statewide.

Nearly every site across the state has a waiting list. That's especially true in north Alabama. Lauderdale County has seven centers; Colbert, five; Franklin, four; and Lawrence, two. Two additional sites were funded in Lawrence County this year, at East Lawrence and Mount Hope elementary schools.

The grant cycles for pre-K are for four years on new sites. While some sites need more funding to start up, each site can apply for its own grant.

There are no sites in Lamar or Sumter counties, and Davis said she hopes that changes in the near future.

Choctaw County had its first center funded this year. It was among the round of 27 new sites.

Each state-funded pre-K site has a teacher and auxiliary teacher and serves up to 18 children. There is a sliding fee scale, not to exceed \$25 per week, for tuition. Some centers use it, some don't.

Dianne Pace, director of the Child Development Center at Northwest-Shoals Community College, was in the first round of 43 funded pre-K classrooms. Central School in Lauderdale County served as a pilot site.

She said that for her center to be funded for another four years means more 4-year-olds are being prepared for kindergarten.

"That's a valuable aspect of our program that we're preparing children for kindergarten and getting them ready to learn," Pace said. "That's a tremendous advantage to the children who participate."

The typical pre-K class structure is on a kindergarten schedule, five days a week, 182 days a year with a minimum of 6 1/2 hours.

"Some children can attend Head Start because they meet income guidelines and some can afford quality day care, but there are many families that don't qualify for either of those and are caught in the middle, and we're catching those

children," Pace said. "We're also preparing parents with our programs too, which is another huge advantage."

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