

Rising up: Stories from our schools

opportunities to earn college credits in high school, and pathways to learn technical skills that are in demand in the current job market, with supports that help the whole family. To enact this vision, careful year over year planning is taking place right now that will phase in programs and services that are responsive to the needs of students and staff.

The end goal is likely several years away, but the process of getting there is already paying dividends, says Rev. Brenda Gregg, executive director of Project Destiny, a social services organization and partner with A+ Schools and One Northside. To facilitate the goal of a vibrant Perry, the project's plan makes services and supports available when requested by families and students. Some of that work has already started, says Gregg, who is also an A+ Schools board member. It has helped organizations access and form deeper relationships with Northside families. "It empowers, I think, community organizations to enhance what they do," she says. "We have formed a very tight-knit group where we can work with each other. So the work that I'm doing at Perry is not necessarily new work, but it's given me a bigger open door to be able to do what I do best for the students that I've always wanted to reach."

Brentley says she had seen other consultants and organizations try to make positive changes at Perry and in the surrounding community in the past. People would sit around at a table and talk about what would help students, and then no real change followed. "But this time, it is real," she says. "This time you have One Northside, A+ Schools, and the Buhl Foundation that are serious about making sure that we don't lose our high school, and making sure the families on the Northside stay within our Perry community."

The planning structure includes three teams with representatives from different parts of the community, from the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship program and the Buhl Foundation to the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers (the teachers union) and the larger Perry community of students, alumni, and parents. The Action Team focuses on near-term projects, gathers input, and builds support for the overall project. A Steering Committee makes sure the right resources and

policies are in place, and the Planning Team meets regularly to develop Perry's long-term vision and planning framework.

Over the coming years, A+ Schools will invite Northside residents to be a part of supporting the school as a model for secondary schools in our region. Be on the lookout for community engagement sessions and surveys in the coming months.✦

See Perry's data on page 120.

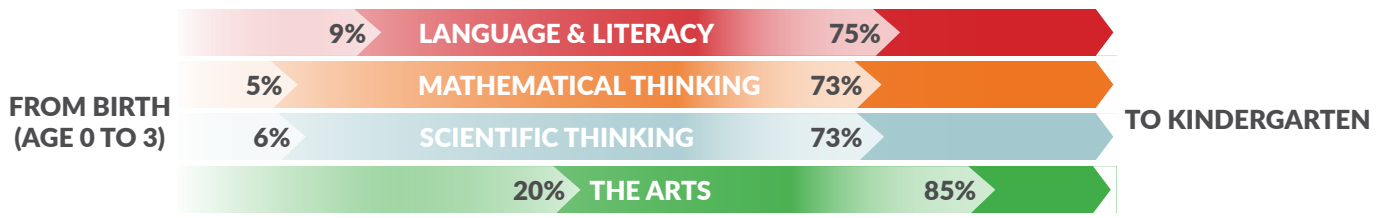
Learning on a continuum: The present and future of PPS' Early Childhood Education program, with a classroom view at Fulton

By Faith Schantz

When Carol Barone-Martin, the Pittsburgh district's executive director for Early Childhood Education, visits a pre-k classroom, joy is the most important thing she wants to see.

The district's Early Childhood Education (ECE) program reaches every area of the city, with classrooms for three- to five-year-olds in most K-5 and K-8 schools, in stand-alone centers, at the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh, and at the Carnegie Science Center. Two 6-12 and two 9-12 schools offer infant-toddler programs for students who are parents. Children aged 3-5 who need special education services come under the ECE umbrella, regardless of setting. And the district partners with child-care agencies to extend the school day for working parents. According to Barone-Martin, it's the most comprehensive program of its kind in the state. And given that it has federal, state, and local funding streams, the program is also comprehensively evaluated. One form of evaluation is the state's Keystone STARS. All of the district's pre-k classrooms have met the STAR 4 standard, the highest rating.

PPS Early Childhood Education program



GROWTH FROM PROGRAM ENTRY TO EXIT, 2017-19 Source: PPS
Percent Proficient from 3 to 5 years-old

Then there's joy. "You can tell right away when you go into a classroom," Barone-Martin says. If children are "joyful and they're comfortable and they're moving, they know what's coming next and they know what they're supposed to do and teachers are interacting with [them]...that really shows us that it's working."

As students move up through the grades, joy isn't typically a measure of classroom quality or learning. That's something Barone-Martin hopes to change. "Early childhood" is defined as birth through age eight by the state and by advocacy groups such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and the district has embraced that definition in its planning. Imagine PPS, the district's citywide initiative, includes a focus on reimagining programming for infants through 3rd grade. Barone-Martin, the design team lead for that area, has been working with her team to figure out how the district can promote joyful learning not only in pre-k, but also in K-3.

ECE at Fulton: A classroom view

What does learning look like for the district's youngest students? Pittsburgh Fulton PreK-5 provides a view. The three-story school is located in the heart of Highland Park, near the Pittsburgh Zoo and PPG Aquarium; it serves the neighborhood and students who enroll in the French language magnet. In the school's single pre-k classroom, Early Childhood teacher Jessica McKenzie and Educational Assistant Sheria Giles are responsible for up to 20 children, who can range in age from those who have just turned three to those who just missed turning five by September 30, the cut-off date for kindergarten.

The day is organized around "circle times"—when students gather as a class—and small group learning. During circle time, students count the number in attendance, locate the day on a calendar, and observe and document that day's weather. Other lessons come from a curriculum called Big Day for PreK™, which focuses on "big experiences" around a theme. For example, teachers might read a book and talk about the idea of family. During small group time, children can choose to go to a center in the classroom to play with toys, make art, look at books, or explore natural materials. The six-hour day also includes breakfast and lunch with a mealtime song, a nap, and outdoor play.

While children play or explore materials in one of the centers, McKenzie and Giles circulate around the room, observing, facilitating, and encouraging, with the goal of furthering the learning. A key teaching method for an early childhood teacher, says McKenzie, is modeling, both to show students how to manipulate objects physically and how to form questions that can push their learning to another level.

For example, with the simple experiments they set up at the beginning of the year, the teachers show that "It's okay to put your hand in there and explore with the materials," she says. "And you actually have to be there with them for the first couple of months to show them how to play." In the block area, many children can build a tower, "but can they do more than that?...You can't just say, 'Okay, let's go play' and then expect them to be busy there. You have to keep showing them and showing them and sit there with them and ask questions," questions that—like the block tower—"keep going up," she says. Giles adds, "It's important for them to see that you enjoy the

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activity,” which validates its worth for the child. Whenever possible in these interactions, McKenzie says they will connect students’ individual learning to what the class has been doing in circle time, so it “becomes more of a powerful experience for them.”

Helping students learn to stick with a task also involves repetition and an approach to learning that emphasizes progress. It might be hard to remember to provide that encouragement in the moment, McKenzie says, but “you just have to be there for them,” repeating “You can do it” or “You did it.” “You can show them what their goal is” while focusing on the necessary steps. “Let’s write the letter G,’ or ‘Let’s practice this one at a time,” McKenzie will tell students. “You’ve got to break it down and have little celebrations, versus, ‘No, you can only write one letter,” she says. Giles adds that when they’re able to spell their whole name, “and actually point at [each] letter and tell us, and they smile, and you give them a hug, that encouragement makes them want to do more.”

When it comes to assessing the learning of three-, four-, and five-year-olds, the district uses the Work Sampling System, developed by Samuel Meisels and colleagues at the University of Michigan. Work sampling involves documenting where students are in the areas of personal and social development, language and literacy, mathematical thinking, scientific thinking, social studies, the arts, and physical development and health. Teachers use a checklist tool that gives performance indicators for those areas, along with contextual information such as different ways a child might demonstrate a skill or behavior. As an example, a performance indicator for scientific thinking is “Uses senses and simple tools to explore.” Three times a year, for each indicator and each child, teachers check off “Proficient,” “In Process,” or “Not Yet.”

Teachers gather this information by observing children during the course of the school day and taking what are known as “anecdotal notes.” While children are counting attendance, for example, McKenzie may note that a child reached “seven”

before stumbling on the next number. While they’re at the centers, she may note that a child asked a classmate, “May I please play here?” At lunch, she might note that a child opened a food packet without help for the first time. Some examples of progress go into the child’s portfolio, which Barone-Martin says should include work that is on a continuum of learning, rather than noting that the child learned “five alphabet letters, and then once they do that, it’s done.”

Children learn by observing phenomena, testing objects to see what they’ll do, using materials to create new things, and acting out what they imagine with whatever is at hand.

How young children learn

The kinds of interactions McKenzie and Giles engage in with students at Fulton, and the forms of assessment used by pre-k teachers district-wide, highlight two important concepts in early childhood education. One is meeting children where they are. The other is educating the “whole child.”

National organizations such as NAEYC, and Trying Together, the Fred Rogers Center, and others in this region, view young children’s learning as an authentic process with the world as its primary source. Children learn by observing phenomena, testing objects to see what they’ll do, using materials to create new things, and acting out what they imagine with whatever is at hand. Given time and encouragement, they follow their own

questions to find answers that often lead to more questions. In this view, children’s development is integrated, and equal consideration is given, for example, to a child’s ability to share a toy, balance on one foot, express a like or dislike, speculate about why an object floats, or put two right triangles together to make a square. These are the elements—experiential, play-based, child-centered, and holistic—that can contribute to a “joyful learning environment,” Barone-Martin says.

From pre-k to “birth to age 8”

To reflect on what this would look like in the primary grade bands, last August a group of Pittsburgh teachers participated in two days of professional learning along with teachers from the Falk Laboratory School, a private school affiliated with the School of Education at the University of Pittsburgh. One session was on play. For K-3, they considered, “What if we implemented some actual play in the morning?” Barone-Martin says. “How would that set the child’s day differently than coming in straight to academics?” They also discussed how academics could be integrated for more “natural” learning experiences for students, such as incorporating math, science, social studies, and language arts in a study of rivers.

Some of these questions are being explored through a pilot program that began last year at Pittsburgh Beechwood PreK-5 and Pittsburgh Weil PreK-5. Along with incorporating more free play, Barone-Martin says teachers are looking at other ways to give children more opportunities to make decisions and choices, a key aspect of child-centered learning. There is a time for whole-group teaching, but “there are also times where children can be practicing and learning in a hands-on way throughout the classroom” without teacher direction, she says. Beyond pre-k, she notes, that will be new for some teachers. With grant funding, the district purchased “flexible furniture” for some rooms, so students could choose what kind of seat was most comfortable for them. Barone-Martin was surprised at how quickly each child was able to determine “whether they needed a solid chair or a wobbly chair or a soft little cushion to sit on.”

The “whole child,” of course, is part of a family. Another concern is how schools can continue to engage parents and other caregivers throughout K-3. Pre-k parents tend to have closer ties to ECE program staff than they have with their children’s schools in the later grades, where they typically have much less contact with teachers, and relationships can become strained or almost nonexistent. In pre-k, where teachers see family members at pick-up and drop-off times and also communicate through a daily note, the message sent to parents is “We’re doing this as a village,” as Giles frames it. To receive federal Head Start funding, the district is mandated to sponsor an Early Childhood Parent Policy Council and provide family services specialists. All parents are invited to serve on the Council and to receive family services specialists’ support, regardless of their children’s eligibility for Head Start. Promoting those relationships and providing families with support in K-3 is “something that we probably need to give more attention to,” Barone-Martin says, as part of reimagining pre-k-3.

This year, the team is considering what lessons have been learned from the pilot schools, and thinking about the design of a new school based on these practices, with a tentative opening date of 2023.

When McKenzie thinks about how K-3 could look more like pre-k, she returns to the concept of meeting children where they are. It shouldn’t be, “you’re in third grade, you’ve just got to get it,” or “you should be at this point,” she says. She and Giles—who have honed their own working relationship over hours of honest conversations about practice—both believe teachers will need more help in the classroom to be able to manage small groups, work on particular skills with individual students, and document progress. But it also may involve changes in teachers’—and administrators’—beliefs and attitudes. When children’s learning is viewed on a continuum, “It’s every day of meeting them with their learning needs,” McKenzie says. ☺

See Fulton’s data on page 52.

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What to look for in a pre-k classroom

When they visit a pre-k classroom, parents and other caregivers have ideas about what they hope to find. It might be dolls that look like their child, engaging books, or up-to-date STEM activities. They also want to know whether teachers relate to children in ways that promote their learning, which can be harder to see. These guidelines, based on recommendations from local and national experts, describe what some of those interactions might look like, along with other basic elements of a high quality pre-k program.

Teachers ask children open-ended questions, helping them to reflect on an activity and to expand their thinking and their language. “Can you tell me more about what you’re building?” “What does this block do?”

In a high quality pre-k classroom:

Teaching and learning

Children spend much of the day playing—their primary way of engaging with the world. When teachers teach the whole group, they pay attention to children’s responses and adapt as necessary, rather than just trying to get through a lesson. Teachers read books, sing, and say nursery rhymes with children. They speak in warm, friendly tones, including when they redirect a child’s behavior.

Teachers are the center of a high quality classroom. They teach, and model learning, through their interactions with students.

- **Teachers encourage children to explore materials, pose their own questions, and make choices.** They handle materials to show children that it’s okay to touch them, and model curiosity by wondering aloud. “What does this seashell sound like? What do you hear?” They ask children open-ended questions, helping them to reflect on an activity and to expand their thinking and their language. “Can you tell me more about what you’re building?” “What does this block do?” “Why did you put that one there?”
- **Teachers recognize and promote children’s interests.** They note what captivates a child during daily activities, and follow up; for example, encouraging a child who lingers while washing her hands to play at the water table. They link whole-class lessons to students’ individual interests. They provide materials and books on topics of concern to their students, “personalizing” the room to reflect that particular class.
- **Teachers push children to go a little beyond what they think they can do.** Teachers encourage children to keep trying, show them their progress and celebrate it (“You did it!”), and wait patiently while they struggle to process a thought or figure out what they want to say. Teachers break a larger goal into smaller goals—“Look, you wrote the first letter of your name”—and remind a child of the overall goal. “Soon, you’ll be able to write your whole name.”
- **Teachers encourage children to play with and learn from one another.** Teachers model conversations for children who are engaging in activities side by side. They might point out similarities among characters in books students are looking at, or differences in their drawings. Teachers show children how to have positive interactions with others, to build community among the class. They also allow them to try to solve some interpersonal problems on their own.
- **Teachers make sure to include all children.** When students are learning and playing on their own, teachers move around the room and talk to individual students about what they’re doing. During whole class activities, they invite specific

children to participate—circling the day of the week on the calendar, circling a particular letter on the list of daily activities, or reporting on the weather outside. Teachers rotate classroom jobs throughout the whole class. If a child can't do a particular job, the teacher adapts it to meet the child's skill level or splits a task between two students. Teachers may pair up children with a partner to encourage participation, or let a child choose a book or topic to share with the class. All students see themselves represented in classroom materials and artwork on the walls, including children who have disabilities.

- **Teachers connect to children's home lives and cultures.** Throughout the day, teachers honor and respect where children come from. They make deliberate efforts to get to know parents and extended family members, including making phone calls with a positive tone early in the year. They invite parents to share their family traditions with the class. For families who speak a language other than English, they provide information in the family's first language. In all their interactions with parents, they assume that parents are the experts on their own children.

Physical space

The classroom is clean and well organized, with materials placed within children's reach. Play areas include objects that children can experiment with and use for imaginative play, such as blocks and collections of small objects. Walls are decorated with children's art work, images that represent all racial groups without stereotyping, and pictures of children with their families. Some objects in the room are labeled with their names to begin to familiarize children with written words. Teachers engage with students at their own level. Classroom spaces, rules, and expectations foster a sense of community.

Teachers never:

- Direct the class to sit at desks and complete worksheets
- Give the whole class any kind of standardized test
- Physically punish a child
- Force a child to apologize
- Show disrespect to a child or family member

To find out how to enroll your child in a PPS pre-k program,

see page 20.

At home with your child

"You are your child's first and most important teacher, and you don't have to be a content expert in academic subjects to ensure they are learning while at home. As remote learning continues, play can serve as a foundation for your child's continued healthy learning, growth, and development. You can use daily activities to explore patterns and sorting while doing the laundry, practice measurements and science experiments in the kitchen, and support early literacy skills just by talking to each other. For resources on how to enhance interactions with your child, visit tryingtogether.org/parenting-resources."

Cara Ciminillo, executive director,
Trying Together

The logo for 'Trying Together' features the word 'Trying' in a stylized orange font and 'Together' in a blue font, with the letters 'o', 'g', 'e', 't', 'h', 'e', 'r' in 'Together' being smaller and more widely spaced.

These guidelines are based on information from Carol Barone-Martin, PPS executive director for Early Childhood Education; Jessica McKenzie, Early Childhood teacher at Pittsburgh Fulton PreK-5; Sheria Giles, educational assistant at Fulton; Emily Neff, PK-3 public policy manager/Kindergarten Transition program director for Trying Together; a guide for finding quality childcare produced by Trying Together; and other sources.