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ALERT

MCPS, UM expand early education programs, begin partnership

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Learning and Belonging (LAB) School Director Kristin Dahl Horejsi, center, chats with Lowell Elementary School Public Schools Early Literacy Coach Melissa Lynn, right, during a tour of the LAB School facilities located at the and Human Sciences building on Monday, Aug. 21. LAB School staff met with a group of MCPS staff for a walk-education collaboration between the public school district and the University.

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A week before Missoula public school teachers would open their own doors to students, doors opened for them at the University of Montana's Learning and Belonging (LAB) School.

Like the preschoolers in the classrooms during the school year, a clutch of early kindergarten teachers, elementary principals and administrators explored some new classrooms, looking to better understand early education in Missoula.

Organizers of the LAB school explained how they encourage active learning, with children free to move from messy art activities to organized tea parties, to basic wooden blocks in the classrooms. Areas are organized with posters explaining the purposes of activities to both encourage early literacy for students and better explain the value of them to parents and educators.

"We didn't just put blocks out because blocks are fun," LAB Assistant Professor of Early Childhood Education Allison Wilson explained. "Instead, it helps model that intention behind selection of materials, with these being some opportunities that you can intentionally hope to facilitate and organize while children are engaging with them."

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The classrooms are for a lot more than fun, too. A recent **survey** led by the nonprofit United Way demonstrated a long-present need for more early education in Missoula. The survey found less than half of the city's young children arrive fully prepared for

kindergarten. Kindergarten readiness is a key indicator of long-term outcomes in education, health and income.

The survey looked at teacher assessments of children's physical, emotional and academic skills, and found 42% of all Missoula County students were fully ready for kindergarten entering the fall academic year in 2022; 38% of students were partially ready and 20% of students were not ready.

“That indicated to us that as a city and as a county, more than 50% of our students are not getting access to high-quality early-childhood experiences that are preparing them for kindergarten,” MCPS P-12 Academic and Community Services Director Barbara Frank said. “And from an economic perspective as a city we're lacking many preschool seats for students. About 50% of our students don't even have access to affordable, low-barrier early-childhood programs.”

Grace Decker, Missoula coordinator with United Way's Zero to Five program that centers on early childhood education, said with the assessment that in some cases Missoula kindergarten classes have seen roughly 80% of students fully ready for kindergarten. At the same time though, there's classes where not a single student is assessed as ready.

Improving kindergarten readiness

The tour marked more than the anticipated beginning of the school year, representing the first day of a collaborative partnership between Missoula County Public Schools and UM. Both institutions seek ways to improve early education in Missoula.

The collaboration grew out of a \$2.6 million grant that will enable MCPS to add three new early kindergarten classrooms this year and the LAB School to add a new kindergarten. The expansion and partnership has been a dream for many on the tour, with it being the first of many back-and-forth visits between the two institutions to share ideas.

“We’re really thrilled to have an opportunity to work with MCPS,” UM Dean of the College of Education Dan Lee told MCPS staff in what was described as the one grown-up learning space in the LAB School. It will be the room where future trainings and discussions are held between the two institutions.

“I don’t see this as being some one-way street,” Lee said. “We really want to make early childhood education grow in this state. So, as your first partner we’re thrilled make this work.”

Since starting the early kindergarten program in 2019, MCPS has only had two classrooms at Jefferson Center, taking a maximum of 18 students each. The classes serve 4-year-olds and some 5-year-olds whose birthday is during the school year. Frank said there’s been a waitlist of several people every year, with the school having to prioritize enrollment for lower-income families as a result.

“We’ve always had more demand for those spaces than we’ve been able to offer,” Frank said.

The three new classrooms will be at Franklin, Lowell and Russell elementary schools. Frank wants to see an additional classroom at Hawthorne Elementary School by next year to make the early kindergarten program more widespread across Missoula neighborhoods.

Decker said family income is one of the most important factors in determining kindergarten readiness alongside the ability to attend early education and what kind of resources parents have available. The survey stated cost as the most common barrier for early childhood education, with 24% of parents reporting early childhood education as too expensive. The area where poverty rates are the highest in Missoula, in the Heart of Missoula neighborhood, had the lowest kindergarten readiness rate of 8%.

“It’s really clear that getting more kids access to early care and education is going to ensure that more kids will be ready to thrive when they get to kindergarten and beyond,” Decker, who also serves on the MCPS Board of Trustees, said.

New beginnings

Montana is one of four states in the nation that don't have a state-run preschool program, along with neighboring states Idaho, South Dakota and Wyoming. This leaves school districts and communities to consider their own options when it comes to early education.

School districts teaching an early kindergarten curriculum have increased over the past several years. According to a **report** from the Office of Public Instruction, the number of Montana districts offering any early education curriculum has gone from 23 districts in 2015 to 88 districts in 2022.

According to Frank, a grant like the \$2.6 million from the Dennis and Phyllis Washington Foundation received earlier this year is one of the only ways possible to start an early kindergarten program in public schools in Montana. After a year of grant funding, the students in the early kindergarten program will be considered as part of the total enrolled school number.

The grant also supported a new transitional kindergarten for ages 4½ to 6 at the LAB School, which previously only served preschoolers. The LAB school is also looking at expanding to first and second grade in the next couple years.

“The transitional kindergarten encompasses that in-between window,” Wilson with the LAB School said. “It captures those children who are just slightly too young to start kindergarten that first year or might be eligible but on the younger end. That’s important because in early childhood, that’s a really critical window of development and so it offers that opportunity to serve that age group.”

The grant and collaboration between MCPS and the LAB School comes with a new MCPS position of early literacy director that will focus on further implementing the new early kindergarten classrooms and then teaching instructional methods to increase reading proficiency.

The position comes after a **bill** passed in the last legislative session aiming to bolster early literacy in Montana. One of the bill's findings was that too many children in Montana are not reading-proficient by third grade. Wilson said it will allow districts to more fully create early literacy and preschool programs. Funding will begin to be allocated in August of next year.

“Our hope this year in partnership with MCPS is that we can really build out what that will look like in action with that intentional focus on early literacy,” Wilson said. “Not just for the benefit of our partnership, but as a model for other communities, too.”

Wilson said the partnership represents a huge step forward for them both.

“It is going to benefit the quality of learning opportunities for young children and their families in our community,” Wilson said.

Frank with MCPS said the early kindergarten program has resulted in some of their highest-scoring students on the readiness assessment. The collaboration will allow for early child education to become a priority in both UM programming and at MCPS.

“We absolutely believe more high-quality preschool seats we can add as a community, whether it's us adding it or private partners or other nonprofits adding these seats, that kindergarten readiness score is going to be turned up,” Frank said. “Our partnership is impacting early childhood education, but on a bigger scale, it's really trying to build some strong teacher education programs for future Missoula teachers.”



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