

# 2 Lake County pre-K schools earn top marks from state

Private day cares get kudos in preparing kids for kindergarten

Denise-Marie Balona | Sentinel Staff Writer March 15, 2009



**Pre-K students at First Presbyterian Church of Mount Dora learn about rockets Friday. The preschool earned the highest possible score on a state report assessing 'readiness rates' for kindergarten. (Tom Benitez, Orlando Sentinel / March 13, 2009)**

TAVARES - Two private day cares in Lake County have earned an A+ from the state for getting youngsters ready for kindergarten.

The pre-kindergarten program at First Presbyterian Church of Mount Dora and the one that Kathleen Smith-Belton, a resident of Fruitland Park, runs out of her home earned perfect scores on the state's annual assessment. The results for Lake's 72 pre-K programs, which are offered at private child-care centers, private schools and public elementary schools, were released recently.

Each year, the state tests children as they enter kindergarten to see whether they know their ABCs and letter sounds — the basics for learning to read. State officials also want to assess other skills, such as how well a child follows directions and gets along with his or her classmates.

The Florida Department of Education then rates the agencies that offer the state-funded Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten program based on how well their former students did on that test. The school's "readiness rate" can range from zero to 300. The average score in Lake County rose 11 points to 251 for the 2007-08 school year, state records show.

Lesha Buchbinder, executive director of the Early Learning Coalition of Lake County, said she was thrilled to learn that the county average beat the state average. Plus, fewer Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten programs in Lake failed to meet the state's minimum standard — a score of at least 214.

"This is a good indicator that our VPK providers are focusing on what it takes to ensure our children are ready for kindergarten," Buchbinder said.

Despite those gains, however, several public schools that offer pre-K classes saw their individual scores fall by as much as 35 points.

The state gave Tiny Tech Preschool, which is offered through Lake Technical Center, a readiness rate of 214 — down from 249.

The pre-K program at Tavares Elementary School also received a much lower score. It earned a 260, which is 21 points lower than the previous year.

On the other hand, Pine Ridge Elementary and Eustis Heights Elementary enjoyed the highest readiness rates of any public school in the county. They earned a 288 and a 286, respectively.



**First Presbyterian pre-K students take a lunch break**  
(Tom Benitez, Orlando Sentinel / March 13, 2009)

Patricia Weisbach, the school district's pre-K director, said district leaders are pleased with the work being done in their pre-K classes. She pointed out that the district's programs have improved significantly in just a year.

Lake public schools' average readiness rate for the 2007-08 school year was 261 - up from 248 in 2006-07.

"While we are pleased with the overall upward trend in our schools, we continually evaluate our programs to account for the unique needs of our new 4-year-olds," Weisbach wrote in a statement Friday.

Since 2005, Florida families have been able to enroll their 4-year-olds for free through the state-funded pre-K program, which was created as a result of a constitutional amendment voters approved in 2002.

Before that, only poor children qualified for free programs designed to help youngsters prepare for kindergarten.

State officials said kindergarten screenings show the state pre-K program is helping. More than half of the students who completed Florida's pre-K program last year passed the ability test given during the first month of kindergarten. Of the kids who didn't participate, 42 percent showed they had the skills for kindergarten.

Though readiness rates are an indicator of a program's success, scholars and child-advocacy groups statewide have urged families not to rely solely on these rates when deciding where to enroll their 4-year-olds for pre-K.

That's because myriad factors affect what a child learns, said Dave Lawrence, president of the South Florida-based Early Childhood Initiative Foundation.

Lawrence said children enter pre-K with different skills and knowledge. Even after completing the same pre-K program, the children of involved parents will often do better on kindergarten screenings than those whose parents don't work with them or take them out to learn about the world.

"What is fair about this?" Lawrence said in an e-mail interview, referring to the state's pre-K rating system. "What possibly is the meaning of this? What does it really tell us? The secret is to focus on what programs are doing for the individual child."

In addition, readiness rates only represent how well the youngsters who were tested perform. Some children enroll in kindergarten classes at private schools where screenings are not administered.

Renet McCall, the preschool director at First Presbyterian Church of Mount Dora, said parent involvement is one of the main reasons her program earned a perfect readiness rate.

Many of her students have stay-at-home moms, who have more time to help out, she said.

The school's small class sizes — only 10 children are in each pre-K class — also are a factor.

But so is the religious focus, said McCall, who was First Presbyterian's pre-K teacher last year.

"The way we interact with the children is in a Christ-centered manner — positive and encouraging," she said. "I think that has a lot to do with how children learn."

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