



PRESCHOOL ADVANTAGE

Spring 2022
e-NEWSLETTER

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

Time to rethink preschool? We Think Not!

Recently, several news outlets have picked up on a study published by researchers at Vanderbilt University pointing to negative outcomes among sixth graders who had attended Tennessee's public pre-K program. The study found that, despite having attended a pre-K program deemed high-quality by national standards, participating students went on to have lower test scores in their elementary school years, were more likely to be placed in special education, and were more likely to have disciplinary records compared to their peers who did not attend the public pre-K. Articles have cited this study as "proof" that pre-K is harmful to children and therefore implementing universal pre-k would be a waste of taxpayer funds.

The study caused us more than a little concern and confusion as it simply did not fit with our lived experience (nor with many other studies that have preceded it, which cite numerous benefits of high-quality preschool education). To better understand what we were reading, we reached out to Dr. Steven Barnett, head of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University. Dr. Barnett agrees that something has gone wrong in Tennessee's public schools, but he believes that to conclude that pre-K is the cause of these negative outcomes makes no sense. In a blog post responding to the study, Dr. Barnett wrote: "the research raises warnings about potential unintended negative consequences that are warranted, **but omissions of research and unjustified assumptions** make it a misleading and inadequate policy guide."

Barnett points out that there are so many variables not taken into account by the Vanderbilt study that it is illogical to conclude that pre-K is the source of problems that developed in subsequent years.

When we shared this study with our 27 partner preschool directors, the response was immediate. One director reached out to us to say she agreed with Dr. Barnett's many good points about why the study of the Tennessee program differed so dramatically from the preponderance of research about preschool education, adding, "those of us who live and breathe working with children and families see first-hand every day the positive difference a quality preschool education makes for children!"

In our experience, the Tennessee study overlooks the most obvious and essential outcome of high-quality preschool. Three and four-year-old children are people who have dignity and importance. They deserve to have affirming and productive experiences. Every opportunity to engage in these experiences provides its own reward. The staff, board, and volunteers at Preschool Advantage love to study and learn about the long term effects of high-quality preschool. However, we cannot underestimate the importance of the fact that today, 98 young learners are having a wonderful day, learning and growing because of the donors, partners and volunteers who comprise this special community.



Nancy M. Bangiola, Esq.
Executive Director

A DAY OF GRATITUDE FOR AND WITH OUR FAMILIES

The Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) launched in March, 2021 and currently consists of 13 members, including both alumni and current Preschool Advantage families. Its mission is to foster a sense of community and connection between staff, volunteers and Preschool Advantage families – past, present and future.

On Tuesday November 23rd, the Preschool Advantage staff and volunteers welcomed PAC members to a celebratory luncheon, transforming the office into a seasonally-decorated space and serving up a delicious lunch. This simple gathering provided a great opportunity for the staff to express gratitude to PAC members for their commitment to our organization.

The luncheon was a perfect pre-holiday occasion to socialize and welcome the committee's newest members. Nancy expressed her appreciation to PAC members for their many contributions including feedback/revisions to the application and website, support of the Helping Hand/Big Buddy initiative, and their valuable

input regarding outreach. Committee

members went home with goody bags filled with a cozy Preschool Advantage fleece blanket, along with some favorite books for their children.

The PAC helps Preschool Advantage meet the needs of current and alumni families, while improving our ability to connect with others in the community who need help affording preschool for their children. The Committee meets monthly (via Zoom for now). PAC members appreciate the opportunity to give back, create friendships and support PA, and the feeling is mutual!



FORWARD PROGRESS for the CHILD SELECTION COMMITTEE



The 2022 application season is well-underway and the Child Selection Committee is hard at work. The Committee, composed of 20 dedicated volunteers, is led by co-chairs Leslie Senke and Carolyn Simpson.

Our volunteers have adapted very well to the online application review system put in place during the pandemic, and now one online transition has led to another. With the help and expertise of our great volunteers from PwC's Florham Park office (see separate article), the Preschool Advantage application is now fillable online, which is a huge help to our families and to the office staff.

Equally exciting is that in-person family meetings are back! The family meeting provides an excellent opportunity for Committee members (usually two at a time) to learn about each family's unique needs and to answer any questions they may have about the program. The information gathered by Committee members at these meetings, along with the application itself, helps Preschool Advantage place each child in a partner preschool that both the family and the Organization feel is a good fit. When asked how serving on the Child Selection Committee keeps Co-Chair Leslie Senke committed to the mission of Preschool Advantage, she shared, "I have tremendous respect for these families who, despite the many challenges they are facing in their lives, choose to make their children's education a priority. It is so rewarding to be able to place these children in our partner preschools where we know they will receive an outstanding educational experience that will allow them to thrive." The efforts and dedication of the Child Selection Committee are truly at the heart of our work, and we are grateful for the time and attention they devote to this very important task.





SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT:

THE DOGWOOD SCHOOL OF CHESTER

PARTNER OF 5 YEARS



The Dogwood School, founded in 1967, in Chester, has partnered with Preschool Advantage for 5 years. Lisa Robbins, Ed.M., Director of the Dogwood School has always considered their outdoor playground space to be one of the school's strengths. There is plenty of room for children to run in the large open space, and mature trees offer shade on hot summer days. There are nooks and crannies to explore, and a brick patio perfect for tricycle riding.

When the pandemic hit in 2020, however, the school's playground took on a much bigger role in the children's education. Lisa took a closer look at how they could become creative in their learning space

while keeping students and faculty safe and without compromising the curriculum. The result: the indoor activities moved completely outdoors.

With tree stumps as chairs and custom-built outdoor chalkboards, the students found themselves in an outdoor classroom immersed in nature full-time. Young learners observed up close the steady changes of the trees during the fall, the variations in weather and temperature, and the insects, birds and wildlife in and around their classroom. When spring came, they dug in the earth, planted seeds, watered and observed; two months later, they tasted their own 'homegrown' sugar snap peas, arugula, lettuces, basil and mint, and harvested sunflower seeds for the birds.

Dogwood students come to school each day dressed for outdoor learning, no matter the weather. Faculty helped parents identify articles of clothing to add to their child's wardrobe as well as where to find specific clothing items. As pandemic restrictions ease, Dogwood continues to embrace the lessons nature has to teach. Their classroom without walls provides hands-on, sensory-based learning that is of enormous benefit to their students.



**26th Annual Golf
Invitational**
**REGISTER
NOW!**

June 13, 2022

Morris County Golf Club

capacity is limited - sign up early to reserve your spot

Join us at the prestigious Morris County Golf Club for a day on the links (or the pickleball court!) followed by a cocktail reception, dinner, and silent auction.

Your participation will help fund preschool tuition for 25 local children this fall.

Scan here to reserve your spot!



Preschool Advantage Partners with PwC



Preschool Advantage has been the fortunate recipient of an invaluable gift from a group of employees at PwC's Florham Park office – 400 hours of volunteer time! To advance the company's focus on equity, diversity, inclusion, and education, PwC professionals are encouraged to share their talents with like-minded organizations in the community. We were thrilled that this initiative led them to Preschool Advantage.

Robert Emmerich and Chelsea Perez of PwC have taken the lead on two key projects on our behalf. First, they helped us create a fully-online application

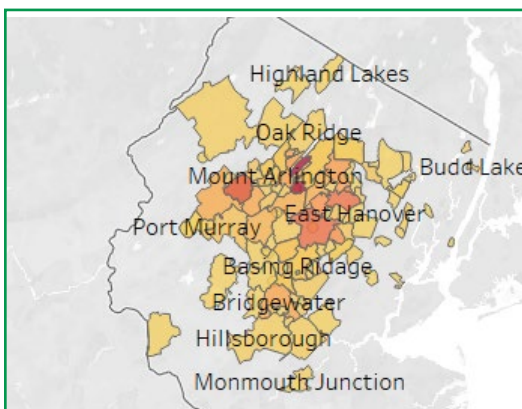
for families that is both secure and fillable on a computer, tablet or smartphone. Families can now submit their "paperwork" electronically (in English or Spanish), thereby easing the process for them and freeing up staff and volunteer time to focus on the next steps: family meetings and school placement.

The second project PwC has embraced was daunting for our small office and limited staff, but it was a crucial one. Robert, Chelsea, and their colleagues have combed through the data on over 1,200 families we have assisted over the past 20 years. They have organized the information and formatted it into a living database where it can be analyzed by numerous pathways, including ethnicity, geography and income level. The result is a dynamic and user-friendly resource that accurately tells the story of the families we have served. This will be an invaluable tool as we embark on our next strategic plan and think about new ways to deliver both our program and our stories to prospective applicants and donors alike.

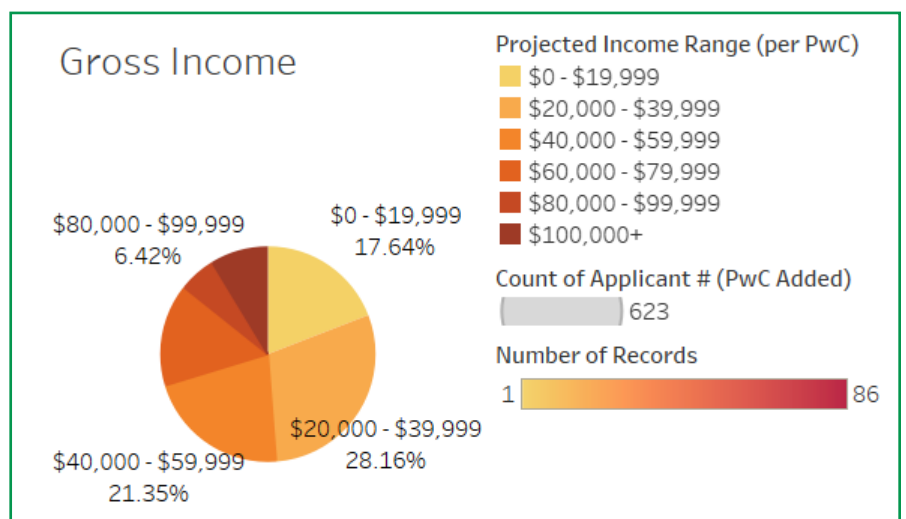
We are grateful for this wonderful opportunity to partner with top-tier professionals, one which we could otherwise never afford. **Thank you, PwC!**



PwC's terrific team helps in so many ways -- even directing traffic at last fall's Turning Leaves event!



Data captured by PwC creates a visual map indicating the locations from which applications were received from 2014 through 2021.



Income graphic visually reflects the range and percentage of family income from 2014 until 2021.

BACK OUT IN THE COMMUNITY!



"It was wonderful to be back spreading our mission face to face! The social connection and interaction between volunteers and prospective families has an in person energy that can't be matched."

Lauren Diemar,
Board of Trustee member



FAREWELL TO PRESIDENT ADRIENNE KIRBY AND WELCOME PRESIDENT RAY HAWKINS

Typically, a Preschool Advantage Board President will serve in this capacity for two years. However, with a new Executive Director scheduled to begin his/her term just as a pandemic was redefining life and work as we knew it, Adrienne Kirby graciously agreed to remain at the helm for a third year. When Adrienne joined the Preschool Advantage community as a volunteer in 2009, the organization (then known as Project Acorn) had a staff of two and just 12 partner preschools. Since then, she has played a key role on the Child Selection Committee, participated in numerous fundraisers, and contributed in countless ways to the growth of a program that now funds tuition for 100 children annually at 27 partner preschools.

Adrienne's steady and devoted leadership has guided Preschool Advantage through turbulent times, and her positive outlook has inspired our entire community to remain focused on our mission. Adrienne's presidency ended in December, but we are thrilled that she remains on the board in service of the many young families in our community.

We are happy to announce the selection of Ray Hawkins, Senior Vice President at Wealth Enhancement Group, as our new Board President. Ray has been with Preschool Advantage as both a volunteer and a trustee for more than 10 years. Ray was introduced to the organization by former board president Eugene Huang. He is a long-time member of the Golf Committee and has also been a key partner in outreach, governance and application review. Most recently, Ray served as Board Treasurer while chairing both the Finance and Development Committees.

Ray's deep commitment to the mission of Preschool Advantage is informed by his strong belief that giving three- and four-year-olds a strong educational foundation is crucial to their future and to the health of our community. His personal experience sitting in on family meetings has made a strong impression. Ray recalls a very shy child who trembled in the presence of the adults in the office. "A few months later, we received a note from the child's mother letting us know how well he was doing at his preschool and how much more confident he had become. It was heartening to know his preschool experience was providing a foundation for his future success, just as it did for my own children."

We welcome Ray to his new role and we know Preschool Advantage will thrive under his leadership.



Preschool Advantage is grateful for Rick Thoeni's 5 years of service on the Board of Trustees, and his many years working with us as a volunteer. Rick has contributed to Preschool Advantage in countless ways, even filling in as the music teacher at one of our partner preschools!

While Rick concluded his board service in December, we are grateful for his ongoing work with the Communications & Outreach Committee and for the energy he brings to all our community outreach efforts.



BOARD & STAFF

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Ray Hawkins, *President*
Wealth Enhancement Group

Kyle Colwell, *Treasurer*
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Gail Reuther, *Secretary*
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County College of Morris

Adrienne Kirby, *Immediate Past President*
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Deirdre's House

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Housing Partnership

Ginger Michaels
Licensed Clinical Social Worker

Carolyn Simpson
Community Volunteer

Denise Lanza
Morris County Park Comission

Judith Pierce
Kindergarten Teacher (retired)

Pam Sullivan
Child Bereavement Facilitator

FOUNDERS

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Stuart Lasser

STAFF

Nancy M. Bangiola, Esq.
Executive Director

Colleen Carey
Communications, Outreach & Events Manager

Jessie Lubow
Director of Development

Wendy Anell
Administrative & Program Assistant

DONATE

