

Private preschools see more public funds as classes grow ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

CHICAGO - The preschoolers who arrived at school early for free breakfast on a recent morning quietly ate granola bars and yogurt as middle school students recited part of the rosary over the public address system.

Almost none of the 4- and 5-year-olds attending the Academy of St. Benedict the African, a parochial school here in the poverty-stricken Englewood neighborhood, are Catholic. But virtually all of them pay little or no tuition, which is subsidized by public funds.

Starting this fall, under an expansion led by Mayor Rahm Emanuel, the number of Catholic schools in the city receiving taxpayer money for preschool will nearly double. Across the country, states and districts are increasingly funneling public funds to religious schools, private nursery schools and a variety of community-based nonprofit organizations that conduct preschool classes.

According to the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University, about one-third of students enrolled in state-financed preschool programs attend classes conducted outside the public schools. In some states, the proportion is much higher: in New Jersey, close to 60 percent of students in publicly financed preschool are enrolled in private, nonprofit or Head Start centers, and in Florida, about 84 percent of 4-year-olds in state-financed prekindergarten attend classes run by private, faith-based or family centers.

Now, as President Obama pushes a proposal to provide public preschool for all 4-year-olds from families with low or moderate incomes, his administration acknowledges that many children will attend classes outside the public schools.

Advocates say that with standards for the educational credentials of the teachers, class sizes and the quality of curriculum, such arrangements can work.

"High-quality pre-K can happen in church basements, community centers or within the Y.M.C.A., as long as the standards are there," said Lisa Guernsey, the director of early education at the New America Foundation, a nonprofit policy institute.

At a time when more lawmakers and activist groups are pushing to direct public money to parents through vouchers or tax-credit scholarships, some say the preschool financing structure could set a precedent for the rest of formal public schooling.

"K-12 is heading to where early childhood has always been," said Harriet Dichter, the executive director of the Delaware Office of Early Learning who helped set up Pennsylvania's public preschool program when she was an education official there. "It's always been in this market kind of thing."

Last fall, Mr. Emanuel invited traditional public schools, charter schools, religious schools, community-based groups and Head Start centers to bid - and in some cases rebid - for public financing for preschool.

In all, more than half of the publicly financed classes in Chicago, serving about 44,600 children, will be run by organizations that are not part of the public school district. Just over one in 10 students will attend preschools operated by faith-based groups.

"I wanted to use competitiveness to reward the best in the class," Mr. Emanuel said in an interview, "and not just say because you're a Head Start or a public school, you win by default."

The patchwork nature of preschool across the country has evolved, driven by private initiatives and a welter of federal, state and local child care financing streams, including Head Start.

Frequently overcrowded public schools do not always have the space to add preschool classrooms. And many preschool classes - particularly those that serve low-income working families - are embedded in broader day care centers that operate longer days than a typical public school.

Experts in early education say that states and school districts need to supervise private preschools regularly. Across the country, practices vary: only four states received top marks from the National Institute for Early Education Research for the quality standards they set for preschools.

Still, even those who oppose using public dollars to pay for private schooling in elementary and high school accept that the logistics of expanding preschool will require help from outside the traditional public schools.

"We recognized the realities of the field," said Shyrelle Eubanks, an early education specialist for the National Education Association, the country's largest teachers' union. "If we were ever going to have universal prekindergarten in the United States, it was likely going to have

a mixed delivery system."

The Obama administration is carefully navigating the politically delicate issue as it promotes the president's preschool proposal.

Daren Briscoe, a spokesman for the federal Department of Education, said in an e-mail that the public pre-K plan "builds on the diverse delivery system that currently exists," but that it "is not directly applicable to the K-12 system."

Here in Chicago, the mayor allocated \$36 million over three years, using revenues from traffic cameras installed near schools and parks, to add 5,000 new public pre-K slots for the city's poorest families.

Including city, federal and state sources, public financing in Chicago amounts to an average of \$4,000 per child. To qualify, preschools must follow approved curriculum guidelines and hire teachers with bachelor's degrees and early childhood certifications. They must also provide health screenings and other social services for parents as well as students.

The Archdiocese of Chicago has provided publicly subsidized preschool classes for seven years in 14 locations. This fall, it will add 13 more.

On a recent morning at Academy of St. Benedict the African, where nearly all the preschoolers are eligible for free and reduced lunch, Amanda Lindsey, a preschool teacher, displayed a YouTube video on a digital whiteboard at the front of the classroom. The children, sitting cross-legged on the carpet, sang along with "Do You Know Your Alphabet?"

Patricia Murphy, the school's principal for more than two decades, said that before the school received public money, it crammed more than 30 children into one preschool classroom.

Under city standards, the school now has two classes of no more than 20 children, each with a teacher and an assistant. Religious education cannot take place during the 2 1/2 hours paid for with public funds.

Salaries for the school's preschool teachers are about \$30,000 a year, Ms. Murphy said, about two-thirds the starting salary of \$49,660 for a public school teacher in the city.

Such pay disparities worry teachers' unions. "My concern is whether or not these kids get the quality of teacher they should have," said Lynn Cherkasky-Davis, the director of professional learning for the Chicago Teachers Union.

At the archdiocese, Sister Mary Paul McCaughey, the superintendent of schools, said families should be allowed to use the public money to send their children to Catholic schools beyond preschool, just as college students can use federal loans to attend private universities. Giving parents such choice, she said, "seems just common sense for me."

Latasha Moore, who grew up in the Englewood neighborhood attending public schools, heard about the Academy of St. Benedict from friends. Her older son, Raji, 4, has been attending since last fall.

"The difference for my son from when he started until now is a drastic change," she said as she dropped him off at breakfast. "He is actually reading things. He is adding and multiplying two-digit numbers."

Ms. Moore, who is not Catholic, said she planned to send both Raji and her younger son to the academy through high school graduation.

"If I have to beg, borrow and steal," said Ms. Moore, who works as a nursing assistant, "I will."

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