

## **Funding gets more local 4-year-olds into pre-K**

**In Monroe County, 12 school districts were granted \$6.1 million, driving significant expansion of program**

**Justin Murphy**

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After just two weeks of school, Dana Campbell's new full-day prekindergarten classroom at William C. Munn Elementary School in Spencerport is already starting to feel like a family, she said. Sometimes that family can seem untraditional.

One day this week — Purple Day, in Ms. Campbell's class — four students were playing together in the kitchen area.

Two were puppies, both named Flower. A third was their mother, trying to place medals around their necks. The fourth, the father, was making banana juice for dinner.

There was also a stethoscope.

“How do you like your new class?” a visitor asked.

“Ruff, ruff,” one of the Flowers replied.

Scenes like this — not exactly like this, but something like this — are happening with greater regularity across Monroe County and New York thanks to an unexpected bonus in this year's state budget.

Scores of New York school districts received significant new funding for full-day prekindergarten, with the promise to maintain it even after federal stimulus money goes away. It has driven a significant expansion in the number of local 4-year-olds able to attend school full-time.

In Monroe County, 12 school districts were granted \$6.1 million. Churchville- Chili, Fairport, Hilton, Honeoye Falls-Lima, Spencerport and Webster all used the funding to either expand their existing full-day program or start one from scratch. Canandaigua, Ontario County, also converted its program to full-day.

“It was a little bit like winning the lottery,” Spencerport Director of Curriculum Kristen Paolini said.



**Dana Campbell leads her prekindergarten class in a get-the-wiggles-out dance at William C. Munn Elementary School in Spencerport on Sept. 20.**



**Charlie Deasy and Hayden Speer play with the dolls at the dollhouse in Dana Campbell's prekindergarten class at William C. Munn Elementary School in Spencerport. PHOTOS BY TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE**

### **Not all districts accepted**

Previously, state pre-K funding was targeted at districts with mostly economically disadvantaged children. The current funding prioritizes places where most children do not attend pre-K, including some of the state's wealthiest districts.

Not all the districts chose to accept the money, including Brighton, Penfield, Pittsford, West Irondequoit and Wheatland-Chili. Some don't have space in their schools or are wary the state support will disappear in the future.

Churchville-Chili already had formed a committee to study the question of implementing full-day pre-K but had been stuck on the question of funding. Once it received the grant, the district quickly created a plan to open classrooms in three of its elementary schools.

There are now 54 students in full-day pre-K in Churchville-Chili; about twice that many entered the lottery for a spot.

“We’ve always had an interest from families,” said Giulio Bosco, the district’s assistant superintendent for instruction. “Internally, we felt a preschool program is one of those things where if you have the ability to offer it, it really gives kids that jump start they need to be ready for kindergarten.”

### **Webster received largest local grant**

The largest local grant went to Webster, which received \$1.1 million for a major expansion of its pre-K program. In the past, it has had about 130 students in half-day pre-K. This year it has 72 students in half-day and 232 in full-day.

Two of those new classrooms are at Webster Schroeder High School, where 12th-graders with an interest in early childhood education can work part-time.

“It’s always something we’ve looked at and thought it would be a great asset,” Assistant Superintendent for Business Brian Freeman said. “Kids are coming from all over into that K and we notice the transition from UPK to K goes a little smoother than if they’re coming from 28 different pre-K and daycare providers.”

The state has been steadily increasing its support for early education in traditional school districts, adding more money for 3- and 4-year-old pre-K as well as ensuring all districts have full-day kindergarten.

Marina Marcou-O’Malley is the policy and operations director at Alliance for a Quality Education New York, part of a coalition that has pushed for more pre-K. She said the importance of a solid academic foundation was even more critical this year when many children have been disadvantaged by CO VID- 19.

“The thing about pre-K is, there’s no argument about whether or not it works,” she said. “Businesses agree, schools agree, parents, teachers — it’s beneficial to students and particularly to low-income students.”

The pre-K expansion grant is funded this year by federal stimulus money, but New York has promised to take it over by 2024, when the federal funding runs out. The question then will be how much bigger pre-K can grow.

“With everything with the state, it comes to the financial backing from Albany for the districts,” Webster’s Freeman said. “We’d love to have a conversation about what more we could do. ... I think the success will send more parents looking in that direction to want to do it in the future.”

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**Camden Bennett looks for letters to spell his name in Dana Campbell’s prekindergarten class at William C. Munn Elementary School in Spencerport on Sept. 20.** TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

