

Preparing for School

By David Shaffer

Most students begin school in kindergarten at the age of five. Several years ago Brown County Schools instituted a program of full day kindergarten for our students. Parents can choose to participate in this program for a modest fee in final preparation for elementary school. Students come to kindergarten at a variety of levels of preparation. One of the major challenges for our kindergarten teachers is the fact that there is a wide disparity between the skills and the knowledge which students possess when they begin kindergarten. These variations include students who come to us with the ability to read and to do some primary levels of mathematics problem solving as well as students who come with very little experience with books and very limited knowledge of basic facts necessary to begin their education. The challenge of helping students catch up in kindergarten often continues through the primary years and the degree of basic knowledge which must be learned can be very hard to make up. At the same time those students who are advanced in their knowledge must be challenged in their kindergarten and primary grade experience so that they do not become bored in their early years of school. The obvious question of how to best close this type of gap is currently debated among the nation's education planners.

Many of the national education planners believe that the best solution is to better prepare all students before they reach kindergarten. This places the actual responsibility with parents of very young children. Giving young children early learning experiences is always evident in those students who come to us with outstanding learning skills. For many years public education has provided pre-school learning experiences for children ages 3-5 who have been identified as either developmentally delayed or who have a learning disability which has been identified with early testing and has resulted in the development of an Individualized Education Plan. Pre-school for students who have been identified as having this status has been available for many years and we have always provided this program in Brown County at Nashville Elementary School. As a part of this program we have included students who do not have learning disabilities in an effort to provide a well rounded learning experience for all students in pre-school. We have found that many parents want a pre-school experience for their children who are already very well equipped to begin kindergarten.

To address the question of better preparing all students for the beginning of their school experience, our School Board voted to expand our pre-school programming and initiated a program at Helmsburg Elementary School this year for the first time. This has allowed us to include additional learning opportunities for as many as 40 more pre-school students. We think this expansion has great potential for addressing those beginning gaps in early childhood education preparation and in helping those students who are already behind at the early ages of 3 and 4 years to catch up. We still have some positions available and interested parents are urged to contact both schools for information. Students may start this program at any point throughout the school year.

Another program which is available to pre-school age parents is the Dolly Parton Imagination Library. This is a free program which provides books to parents of children ages 3-5. This program has been established in Brown County at the Church of the Lakes. Interested parents can register for this program simply by signing up on a simple application form. The Dolly Parton Imagination Library will then intermittently send free books to the registered child. Since we know that one area of deficiency for students who come to us behind in learning experiences is the fact that they have not had many or any experiences with books, the ability to receive books for young children is an important opportunity. We urge people with pre-school age children to consider this opportunity because we believe reading to children helps alleviate a significant deficit of many children who begin kindergarten at a disadvantage. And I emphasize that there is no cost to participate in this program which exists right here in Brown County.

We do hope to attract more students to our pre-school programs at Helmsburg and Nashville. The opportunities presented by pre-school education are aimed at helping our children gain a strong foundation so they can start their public education with confidence and preparation for the kindergarten curriculum. We also continue to encourage reading to young children and we feel the Dolly Parton Imagination Library and programs at our own Brown County Library are of great benefit to the children in Brown County. The preparation and exposure to learning in early childhood education definitely has an impact throughout all of the years in school.