

Number of free preschool slots in Jackson County drops by 144 after ABC Academy loses state funding

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CITIZEN PATRIOT | KATIE RAUSCH

Ruth Sleight, center, dances with several of her 3-4 year old charges on the first day of school at the Lincoln Head Start school in Jackson. ABC Academy lost state funding for free preschool this year, leaving Jackson County with 144 fewer slots available in the Jackson County's Great Start Readiness Program. The program, which provides free preschool, now has 442 spots.

Jackson County has 144 fewer slots available in a free preschool program this school year. The reduction is a result of ABC Academy losing state funding for free preschool. The loss of 144 slots leaves Jackson County's Great Start Readiness Program with 442 spots this year, said Sheri Butters, director of the county program.

Advocates of early childhood education said the result will be waiting lists for other free programs that help low-income families.

"The ripple effect is next year we're probably going to see children who needed a preschool experience and didn't have that available," Butters said. "So I think we're going to see a decrease in kindergarten readiness." Butters said local officials were disappointed that ABC Academy lost funding because it provided a quality programs at its three locations — 800 Laurence St., 3210 Lansing Ave. and 2111 Emmons Road.

Remaining Great Start programs are offered by the Jackson, Columbia, Michigan Center, Napoleon, Northwest, Springport, Vandercook Lake and Western school districts, Butters said. Children are eligible for free Great Start preschool programs based on family income — \$44,700 or less annually for a family of four — and other risk factors. Owner Kathy Hoszkiw said ABC Academy is working on plans to offer a reduced-tuition preschool program for children who would have been in its free program. She said ABC Academy applied for renewal of funding for the free preschool program, but was told by state officials that there was not enough funding for all of the applicants.

ABC Academy has about 300 children its tuition-funded preschool programs, Hoszkiw said.