

KINDERGARTEN READINESS

## Increase in funding doubles preschool slots in county

July 19, 2013 By Nancy Hastings

HILLSDALE COUNTY — Educators and advocates for early childhood services have welcomed an expansion of enrollment that will go a long way toward boosting kindergarten readiness for many students. In June, Gov. Rick Snyder signed a budget that pumped \$65 million more into early childhood education for the 2014 fiscal year with the same amount designated for 2015. Over the next two years, Michigan will go from enrolling 32,000 4-year-olds in the Great Start Readiness Program to enrolling 66,000. The 60 percent increase over current funding is the largest expansion in early childhood education in the nation and creates 16,000 more preschool slots statewide next year for disadvantaged children.

In Hillsdale County, the Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP) will receive an increase of 149 new preschool slots for 4-year-olds. Hillsdale ISD Great Start supervisor Ginelle Skinner said the funding increase for Hillsdale County is \$577,700. "This will almost double the slots that we currently provide for 4-year-olds," Skinner said. "We have free, state-funded GSRP preschool programs in all parts of our county for families to access including Hillsdale, Jonesville, Litchfield, Reading, Pittsford, Waldron, North Adams, and Camden.

"I'm so excited about the opportunity to be able to provide high-quality preschool for more children in Hillsdale County," Skinner continued. "There has been a lot of research surfacing in the past few years about the positive effects of preschool on not only a child's readiness for school, but their readiness for life. I would urge every parent to send their child to a high-quality preschool program to give them a great start." According to the new state guidelines, all children must be age 4 on or before Nov. 1 for preschool.

Hillsdale Schools superintendent Shawn Vondra said the news is good and comes as the result of the state of Michigan rolling the kindergarten eligibility age back for the next few years, actually saving money in the long run. "This year it's Nov. 1 to enter kindergarten where it used to be Dec. 1," Vondra said. "Every child doesn't have to start in the state of Michigan then, but is required by age 6." Over the next two years the eligibility will first be moved to Oct. 1; then Sept. 1 will be the end or permanent spot, Vondra said. "So in two more years, by Sept. 1 the child is eligible," Vondra said. "What this means is a 20 percent increase of preschoolers and the need to answer that increase."

While Vondra thinks it is "incredibly important" that the state fund these spots, he said the allocation to go to kindergarten is \$7,000 per student and for preschool it's half that amount. "The state is saving money when they provide half that amount for preschool," he said. "We asked for as many slots as the state would allow." Preschool is something Vondra said the district has made a "conscious choice" in supporting. "Our district has been a firm believer in preschool for many years and we really appreciate the community schools, our board and staff and how they value preschool," he said. "This is in line with our philosophy and will double spots available."

Cindy Rowe, children's program manager at the Hillsdale Community Action Agency, said what this increase does is give more children the opportunity to get the rich preschool experience that is needed to be prepared for kindergarten, including language skills and the ability to interact with their peers. "There are significant academic gains for a child who is able to take part in a quality preschool," Rowe said. "It's a great opportunity for children and families."

For information or to register children for GSRP, call:

- Hillsdale, 437-7347    ■ North Adams-Jerome, 287-4263
- Jonesville, Litchfield, Reading, Pittsford, Waldron, and Camden, 437-3346

### To learn more

For more information regarding the GSRP programs call Ginelle Skinner at the Hillsdale ISD at (517) 437-0990 ext. 207.



A decorating project using M&M candies was part of the North Adams Little Rams GSRP program last year.

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