

# EARLY CROWD

Head Start numbers skyrocket; hundreds on waiting list



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Ashley Palmer takes a break from reading during her Head Start class at Lincoln School in Summit Township.

By Tarryl Jackson

tjackson@citpat.com — 768-4941

More than 1,000 children in Jackson and Hillsdale counties are signed up to get an early start on their education, but several hundred may have to wait.

At the start of the school year, the Community Action Agency's Head Start program had a waiting list of 300 children — about three times more than expected.

"These are unprecedented numbers for us," said Jessie Murray, spokeswoman for the nonprofit agency. "No one wants to turn anyone away. There's so much need."

As more low-income families ex-

perience job loss and increased living costs, more parents are seeking free assistance for early education and child care.

Head Start is a national, federally funded child-development program that serves primarily low-income children ages 3 to 5, helping them get a jump on the basics before kindergarten.

"The earlier they start, the better off they are," Murray said.

The program was created in 1965 and provides education, health, nutrition and parent-involvement services.

"We work with the whole family, not



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Imarri Watson, left, and Kiarra Kelley work on creating some hair-dos during playtime at Lincoln School.

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Teachers assistant Monika Cram leads children in a dance as part of the Head Start program at Lincoln School in Summit Township.

# Head Start enrollment rises

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just the child," said Jacqueline Barber, Head Start coordinator at Lincoln School, 154 W. Clark St. in Summit Township.

Tuesday was the first day of Head Start at Lincoln School, and 115 children were in attendance. Students were introduced to the classroom setting and participated in free play, music, art and storytelling.

"I like to color," said 4-year-old Jazmyn Smith. "We have lunch and we have fun."

"We like to play," classmate Katelyn Holdaway, 4, said.

Children who complete Head Start are prepared for kindergarten, excited about learning and confident about their own abilities, officials

## Federal funds for programs

The local Head Start program receives \$5.8 million annually in federal funding for 719 Jackson and Hillsdale county children, or about \$8,066 per child.

The Early Start program receives \$1.2 million a year in federal funding for 95 children, or about \$12,630 per child.

say.

Jackson resident Felicia Moyer heard about the program from a teacher at the Lyle Torrant Center, where her 3-year-old son, James Simmons, attends school.

"I hope his speech improves and for him to just be able to play with other kids," Moyer said.

More than 700 children from Jackson and Hillsdale counties are enrolled in Head Start. Another 95 children are served through the Early Start program, which is designed for pregnant mothers and eligible families who have children ages 3 and younger.

The local Head Start program, which began at the Lincoln site in 1985, was recently accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Head Start has 12 local sites.

"That's just another validation of the strengths of the program," Murray said about the accreditation. "We set the bar really high."