

THE KINGSBURG RECORDER

Tuesday, November 23, 2010

Kingsburg school has transitional kindergarten program

By Mary Lou Aguirre

If you haven't been inside a kindergarten class in the last decade, you may be surprised how things have changed. Long gone are the days of naptime and play areas -- that's for the preschool set. "Activities are more hands on. There is more language being used and there is dramatic play with the use of puppets. It's very interactive," says Shirley Esau, Washington School principal. In short, kindergarten is more academic. By the 2012-2013 school year, children will be required to be 5 years old by Sept. 1 before they can enter kindergarten, due to California State Senate Bill 1381 Kindergarten Readiness Act of 2010 signed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger on Sept. 30.

Previously, children could enter kindergarten if they turned five by Dec. 2. Other states with the December cutoff are Connecticut, Vermont and Michigan.

So what happens to the children with fall birthdays? Enter transitional kindergarten, a place for "young fives": Children turning five from Sept. 2 through Dec. 2.

Exceptions for early admission to kindergarten will be decided on a case-by-case basis by each school district, according to the bill.

Transitional kindergarten, in the form of a pilot program, has been up and running at Washington School since August. Other communities include Sacramento, Los Angeles and Long Beach.

"The funding that would have been spent on kindergarten will be redirected to transitional kindergarten, allowing California to provide it without any additional cost," according to the Preschool California website.

The voluntary program has 25 Kingsburg children.

"It's a full class with six children on the waiting list," Esau says.

Esau said parents are happy with the program.

"These children could do well in a regular kindergarten class," Esau said. "It's not about their intelligence or academic skills. Parents are worried about maturity."

Kingsburg resident Arin Walls describes her son Wyatt, who turned 5 on Oct. 15, as "shy and timid." She was about to enroll Wyatt in a private preschool until she heard about the transitional kindergarten program at Washington.

"I'm amazed how much he is learning," Walls said. "He knows his alphabet and can count up to 30. He knows 20 sight words which he didn't know before. As an individual, he is becoming more mature."

Wyatt is also playing with the children enrolled in regular kindergarten.

"He loves it," Walls said. "Every day, he comes home and says 'I met a new friend.' I think he's benefited from the program."

Children put in a full day from 8:10 a.m. to 1:50 p.m.

Washington transitional kindergarten teacher Ying Lee has taught kindergarten for six years. She spoke of her own childhood kindergarten memories.

"I remember story time, recess and tricycles," she said. "I don't remember reading and writing. I feel kindergarten has gotten much more rigorous."

Her students alternate between learning stations. During a recent visit, the students sounded out letters, listened and followed instructions and used Leap Frog reading DVDs. Even the crayons are smaller to fit little fingers.

"We are going at a slower pace," Lee says. "I can take a little bit of time to teach pre-literacy skills. I have more flexibility to meet individual needs. That's what I like most about the program."

In turn, Lee says, children aren't pushed to a level of frustration.

Barbara and William Zisler of Kingsburg are guardians to granddaughter Erica Uhl. Barbara Zisler says she and her husband see Erica thriving.

"The curriculum is outstanding," she said. "What actually impresses us is that Erica is actually spelling. She can spell 15 words. Every morning she's up and at 'em and ready to go. She doesn't understand why she can't go to school on Saturday or Sunday."

Erica and Wyatt are among the children learning what it means to be part of a classroom.

"Appropriate classroom behavior is being able to interact and play with other kids," Lee said. "To follow direction and self-control, sitting on the carpet and being able to focus and listen for 10 or 15 minutes."

The different activities or stations allow the children to move around, Lee says.

"It gets some of the wiggles out," she said. "There's a lot of switching and activities are broken up. They are constantly moving."

Classroom time extends to the home as well. Transitional kindergarten students are given two pages of homework.

"It's very simple and at their level," Lee says. "It might be to practice letters or write the numbers 1 to 10. The parent really needs to work with the child, it shouldn't take more than 5 minutes a night."

Parents, Esau says, are an important factor in any child's success in school.

"It depends how much their parents are involved in their education," she said. "Are there books at home? Are people reading? Are there writing instruments at home? If a child has been in pre-school, they are more likely to succeed in kindergarten."

A list of kindergarten readiness skills are listed at the school's website:

Here's a sampling:

- Show interest in books and reading
- Can tell and retell familiar stories
- Use 5-10 word complete sentences
- Express ideas with drawing
- Identify colors, shapes and numbers 1-10
- Know some simple songs and rhymes
- Understand and follow rules and two-step directions
- Will share, play and cooperate with others
- The goal of transitional kindergarten is to be a launching pad for the years of education to follow.

"My biggest hope when children leave kindergarten is that they will be successful in education, to be top students and not the bottom of the class."

This includes, Esau said, being "socially and emotionally" able to interact with their peers and "do problem-solving."

"Most importantly to have a positive attitude about school," she said.