AgoodstartonHeadStart

Preschool program making strides in county since new company took reins

Posted by the Asbury Park Press on 07/15/06

BY ANDREA ALEXANDER, FREEHOLD BUREAU

ASBURY PARK — Five-year-old Ronessa Clemming took a proud curtsy in front of federal Head Start Commissioner Channell Wilkins as he praised a story she wrote with her teacher during Monmouth County Head Start’s new summer school program.

Wilkins visited a class Friday at the Asbury Park Head Start Center on Grand Avenue during a trip to review programs offered by the county’s new provider.

Acelero Learning Monmouth County Head Start Inc., a subsidiary of Acelero Learning Inc. of New York, took over the program Nov. 1 from a previous provider that had run into financial troubles.

Acelero won a $4.8 million one-year contract last fall from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Head Start Bureau to take over the program. The company expects that its contract will be renewed for another year, said Aaron Lieberman, Acelero’s founder and CEO.

Since taking over the county’s Head Start, a preschool program for children living at or below federal poverty guidelines, Acelero has increased enrollment and has added a summer school program at all six centers. The company expects to have 506 students enrolled by the fall.

Acelero also recently announced that it entered into a lease for three additional classrooms at the Freehold Head Start Center. Several children from Freehold were bused to the Head Start Center in Howell because the Freehold site had a waiting list.

Acelero said at the time that it could not afford the high cost of busing while meeting its goal to improve the program and enroll more students.

The new classroom space will allow Acelero to double its capacity in Freehold to about 120 students, said Monmouth County Head Start Director Kara A. Schultheis. The additional space should alleviate the need for busing, Lieberman said.
“Our goal is to locate the centers where the families live,” Lieberman said. “We would rather spend money on teachers and other services than busing.”

The decision to add classroom space in Freehold was hailed by the community.

“It is going to be great for the families because there are a lot of families in need,” said Cecilia Reynolds, publisher of Nosotros, a local Spanish-language newspaper, and an advocate of Freehold’s Latino community.

Acelero also is providing a summer school program for Monmouth County Head Start students for the first time in three years, Schultheis said.

The summer school program runs from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. Families who receive assistance through Work First New Jersey, a welfare to work program, can enroll their children in extended day services, from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m.

The extended day services are provided in the Abbott districts of Neptune and Asbury Park at no cost to the families. Families in non-Abbott districts are required to make a co-payment, Schultheis said.

Extended day services also are available during the school year.

The Head Start summer program offers a chance for teachers to be more creative with their lesson plans, said Jesse Herbert, who teaches a class of 5-year-olds. He has taught a lesson on sharks, is growing tomatoes and other fruits and vegetables in the classroom, and has read a book a day with the students.

Four-year-olds are working on their reading skills, shapes and numbers and are using online education programs. Herbert said he is getting his students ready to enter kindergarten in the fall.

"In general, they get used to the school-day routine," Herbert said. "It's super important."