



BOB KALISH / THE TIMES RECORD

**WOOLWICH CENTRAL SCHOOL** teacher Sarah Sample evaluates a child's reasoning skills during the kindergarten screening process last May.

## SMART FROM THE START



A look at the way good early childhood education provides a lifetime of benefits.

- **Monday:** The vital role of preschool in preparing a student for kindergarten
- **Tuesday:** A peek into the kindergarten screening process
- **Wednesday:** How early education success or failure translates to crime rates of the future
- **Thursday:** Drawing a link between early education and worker productivity
- **Friday:** Analyzing state and local efforts to bolster early childhood education

## A hop, a skip — and a very big jump

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Kindergarten screening introduces most children to the public school experience. Reporter Bob Kalish shares perspectives on the process from parents, educators and children.

BY BOB KALISH  
Times Record Staff

### WOOLWICH

It's Day One of kindergarten screening at Woolwich Central School. It will be a long day for the teachers doing the screening and another day of screening will follow this one.

The first stop for parents, their 5-year-olds clutching their hands, is with school bus drivers Dick and Julie Mackie, who sit behind a table at the entrance to the Woolwich Central School library.

"We show them the route, talk to them about bringing notes. If there are any changes, and generally assure them," said Dick Mackie.

"Them" are the parents, who wait on folding chairs outside the library while

inside their child undergoes the ritual necessary to spend the next 13 years in the educational system. It all begins with the screening process.

No child fails the screening. "The screening is for the school's benefit," says Sarah Sample. "We check out their large motor skills, fine motor skills, understanding concepts, information, all of those things help us prepare for this particular child."

Here comes Angelo and his mother, Jessica Barmes. The mother is taken to another room by guidance counselor Betty Buchan, where they will discuss expectations and Buchan will answer any questions Barmes may have.

Meanwhile, Beth Harrington takes Angelo into a room where he will be asked to hop, skip and jump. This is the large motor skills segment. When he's done with that, he switches to a small motor skills, where he demonstrates how to hold a pencil. Then he goes to Kim Plummer, where

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## SCHOOL

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he is asked to place blocks in front of, behind, above and below a model house.

While Angelo seems to enjoy demonstrating his readiness for kindergarten, his mother waits with her younger toddler in the landing, talking with another mother, Bethany Nicolino, whose daughter, Courtney, is also in the library doing the screening.

"It brings a lump in my throat," she says, when asked how it feels to have a child ready to start school. "It is a big moment."

Big it is, when you consider that entering kindergarten is not just entering a classroom for the first time, but it's the beginning of the rest of a child's life. They enter at 5 years old and leave when they're 17 or 18, ready to enter society or so we like to think.

But recent research has shown that by starting a child's education a year earlier, at the age of 4, society can reap much benefit. That is the basis for the movement toward public schools offering pre-kindergarten for 4-year-olds. Woolwich school officials are planning their new school to include a pre-kindergarten program.

### Now and later

It may seem obvious and intuitive, but it's true that children who participate in early childhood education reap benefits in later years. According to the Web site www.prenknew.org, studies over the years have shown that pre-kindergarten programs increase high school graduation rates, help children do better on standardized tests, curtail grade repetition and reduce the number of children placed in special education.

Other studies show that pre-kindergarten programs produce adults who are less likely to participate in crime and delinquency, less likely to become pregnant as teenagers, make higher wages and contribute to stronger, more stable families.

The Phippsburg pre-kindergarten program was an outgrowth of the Preschool Initiative Collaborative, which met in 2005 with the goal of exploring possibilities. PIC led to CHOICES, Children Having Opportunities in Collaborative Early Setting.

Rosalie Powers directs the pre-kindergarten program, which officials hope to extend to other schools in the new Regional School Unit 1 District by the 2009-10 school year.

"The PIC program brings 4-year-olds into the school," Powers said. "They meet the teachers, observe the routines and the school schedule. Once a month we have family fun night at the school. And we have a condensed version of a school day, where the children take the school bus from the post office to the school and go through a typical day in an hour and a half."

Set to begin its third year, the CHOICES program is deemed a success by Chris Anderson, speech therapist at Phippsburg Elementary School.

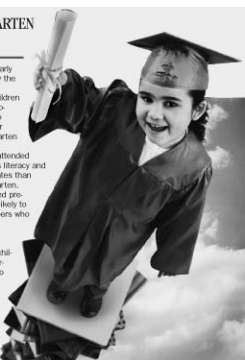
"It's been very successful," Anderson said. "We've found that it helps the parents as much as the children. They feel better when their child finally enters kindergarten, because they're familiar with the teachers and the routine. And with the kids, we've found fewer cases, a notable drop, in children acting out or crying that first day." Pre-kindergarten programs pay dividends to the entire community. For every dollar spent on it, the taxpayer saves \$7 by reducing the need for

## THE PRE-KINDERGARTEN ADVANTAGE

Students who have participated in early childhood education programs show the following advantages:

- In a Chicago longitudinal study, children who attended a pre-kindergarten program were 29 percent more likely to graduate from high school than their peers who did not have pre-kindergarten training.
- Michigan fourthgraders who had attended pre-kindergarten passed the state's literacy and math assessment tests at higher rates than their peers who had no pre-kindergarten.
- Maryland fifthgraders who attended pre-kindergarten were 44 percent less likely to have repeated a grade than their peers who did not attend pre-kindergarten.
- Pre-kindergarten attendance reduces the number placed in special education. Among Chicago children, those who attended pre-kindergarten were 41 percent less likely to require special education services than their peers who did not attend pre-kindergarten.
- Chicago children who did not attend pre-kindergarten were 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime by age 18 than their peers who had been pre-kindergarten participants.
- North Carolina children who attended pre-kindergarten were less likely to become teen parents than their peers who did not attend pre-k (26 percent versus 45 percent).
- Forty-year-old adults in Michigan who attended pre-kindergarten as children were more likely to be employed and had a 33 percent higher average income than their peers who did not have pre-kindergarten.

Source: www.prenknew.org



remedial and special education, welfare and criminal justice services, according to a Rand study in California. And a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services study showed that children who attended pre-kindergarten at Head Start centers had more advanced skills in areas including following directions, problem solving and joining in activities, thus improving efficiency and productivity in the classroom.

Maine Attorney General Steven Rowe last September told members of a new com-

mission formed to develop a strategic priorities plan for Maine's young children that spending more money on early childhood services now will save money later.

"The earlier you invest, the higher the return," he said.

Back in Woolwich, the screening continues into the afternoon. "The object of the screening is to determine what each child needs from us to be successful in school," said Sample. "We are obligated to provide an education to everyone. It's the law."

Sample said it's obvious most of the time who has had a pre-school experience when they sailing through the screening process. Still, as Courtney Nicolino's mother will tell you, even though she is prepared for the big moment of entering kindergarten, the mother still finds it emotional.

"I remember my own entry into kindergarten," Bethany Nicolino said. "I remember being overwhelmed, but excited. I know Courtney will do fine."