

Head Start to have classes at Robinson

Monday's agreement renews relationship with Akron schools

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Head Start will be holding half-day preschool classes at the newly rebuilt Robinson elementary school this year, using its own staff and teachers, according to an agreement approved by the Akron school board Monday.

The agreement marks the renewal of a longstanding relationship between Head Start — the federal early childhood development program for low-income families — and Akron Public Schools that ended six years ago because of changes in funding requirements.

Superintendent David James said that the district and Head Start — which is operated locally by Akron Summit Community Action — probably will reach agreements on providing classroom space in other newly rebuilt schools, known as community learning centers.

"That's also one of our strategies for engagement because when those families are in our buildings, we think there's a higher likelihood that when they enter kindergarten, they will attend Akron Public Schools instead of going someplace else," James said.

Head Start will furnish the two classrooms and be responsible for enrollment (projected now at 68 between morning and afternoon classes), paying site staff and meeting the educational requirements of the Head Start program.

The children qualify for the federal free and reduced-price breakfast and lunch programs, so Akron Public Schools will provide those meals and sell snacks and meals to Head Start staff.

Community Action has always run the federal anti-poverty program in Summit County and for several years, it subcontracted some of its work to Akron schools.

But the loss of 80 percent of its state funding forced the agency to take back some of its children — and the federal money that paid for them — from the schools.

The district would have had to spend \$200,000 of its own money to keep the program viable, so the school board decided in May 2004 to end the arrangement.

Debra Foulk, now the district's executive director of business affairs, was hired in 1987 to help provide breakfast and lunch to the Head Start sites.

"At that time, we had about 750 students located in school sites and off-school sites," Foulk said. "So you could be in a church. You could be in a low-income housing development or whatever."

Akron Public Schools, as a subcontractor, provided space as well as staff to teach the program. It provided a good transition for kids entering kindergarten, Foulk said.

"If they were at the school, they tended to be from the local school area, so then they just graduated to that individual school," she said. "If it was the local church across the street, we actually made available — toward the end of their year — a day in which they would visit that school."

Head Start provides a wide range of training in addition to school readiness, including health and nutrition, family functioning, social skills and parenting skills.

Foulk was impressed with the growth she saw in the Head Start kids. "Some of these kids who come in and they would barely know their colors and they barely knew their alphabet," she said. "To have them know their name and be able to write their name and stuff like that really did prepare them to go on to the kindergarten classes that we offered."

At Robinson, Head Start will have two morning classrooms of up to 17 children each from 8 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. and two classes, also up to 17 each, from noon to 3:30 p.m.

Foulk said most of the students will live within walking distance of Robinson.

"This is very exciting for me to see [Head Start] come back because it really gets the kids excited about our schools," she said.

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