

HEAD START LOOKS TO THE FUTURE AFTER 50 YEARS

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WINCHESTER — Cindy Draucker doesn't remember stepping into a Head Start classroom as a preschooler in 1968 — but she remembers her most recent visit. It was when she reported to work Friday.

More than 45 years after first participating in Head Start, a federal program for low-income preschool-age students, Draucker continues to be involved with the program, currently serving as Apple Country Head Start's health and nutrition coordinator.

"I believe in the program," Draucker, 52, said in a recent interview.

So do many others.

"These are the children that wouldn't be able to afford a preschool," said Apple Country Head Start Director Thea Thomas. "These are the kids who'd be at home with a family member or in a day care, and Head Start is so much more than that."

Head Start is the longest running national school readiness program in the U.S. The federally funded nonprofit program is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year.

It has grown from an eight-week summer offering for preschool-age children to serving more than 1 million children from birth to age 5 annually through a variety of programs. More than 30 million children have been served during the program's 50 years.

"It's not just the children we serve," Thomas said in an interview last week. "We serve the families."

Apple Country Head Start has operated in the Northern Shenandoah Valley for 21 years. It has an annual operating budget just more than \$1 million and serves 162 3- to 5-year-olds.

Its four area locations are at:



Julian Heimburger, 4, drinks his milk during breakfast before class Thursday in the Head Start program at Douglas Community Learning Center. (Photo by Jeff Taylor/The Winchester Star)



Boys in the Head Start program at the Douglas Community Learning Center pretend a blue line on the floor is a bridge as they head to class after breakfast Thursday. Head Start is the longest running national school readiness program in the U.S. The federally funded nonprofit program is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. (Photo by Jeff Taylor/The Winchester Star)

Shady Elm Road, southwest of Winchester.

Northwestern Regional Education Programs (NREP) facility in Frederick County.

D.G. Cooley's Lower Campus in Clarke County.

Douglas Community Learning Center in Winchester, although that facility's future is up in the air. The building is owned by Winchester Public Schools, which is looking to convert it into administrative offices.

Frederick County Public Schools is considering implementing a preschool program within the next several years. This year, Winchester Public Schools expanded its preschool program from 36 to 144 slots, but the expansion has not impacted Head Start, Thomas said. She continually has a wait list, she said.

To qualify for Head Start, families must have incomes at or below the federal poverty level, which is \$24,250 for a family of four, although some families slightly above the poverty level are accepted.

Thomas, who worked previously as a case manager at a homeless shelter in Loudoun County and as a social worker in Warren County, said she often sees a cycle of lack of education and teen pregnancy in the families that Apple Country serves.

Of this year's 162 students, one is homeless, one is in foster care and 136 (84 percent) are at or below the poverty line. Eighty-two students (51 percent) come from single-parent households.

"I've always said that could've been me," said Thomas, who grew up in a single-parent household, of the families she sees struggling. Growing up, her family had a strong support system — something Head Start attempts to provide for its families.

Each family enrolled in Head Start is issued a family service worker who, among other tasks, helps parents establish goals, such as learning English or working toward earning a GED diploma.

Sarah Dart, 24, sends her son, Trae Rodney, to the classes housed at the Douglas Community Learning



Head Start students eat breakfast before classes at the Douglas Community Learning Center in Winchester on Thursday. Head Start is celebrating its 50th anniversary. (Photo by Jeff Taylor/The Winchester Star)



Thea Thomas, executive director of Apple Country Head Start, wears a Santa hat as she talks with Jhuryni Showalter, 4.

Center.

Dart, of Winchester, has been working with her family's service worker to establish goals. One is for Dart, who dropped out of college when she became pregnant with Trae, to return to school to earn an accounting degree. The family's service worker provided her with information about local and online college options.

"By the end of the year, that is my goal — to be enrolled in school," she said. "They opened my eyes to a lot of opportunities I didn't know were there before."

This year, Apple Country is also partnering with Literacy Volunteers to provide English as a second language (ESL) and computer classes to parents at school sites. About a dozen parents showed up for the first ESL class at the end of November and three are enrolled in the computer class.

"If you don't educate the family, you're not going to be able to reach the child so that they understand the importance of education," Thomas said.

Draucker helps coordinate immunizations, physicals, dental visits and hearing and vision screenings for local families. Thanks to vision screenings, at least five students have received glasses this school year, she said.

Draucker has worked with Apple Country Head Start for 13 years, but she also spent about eight years as a child involved with Head Start.

She attended the program as a 5-year-old in 1968 in Fairfax County, and then spent most mornings and afternoons for the next several years at the center when her mom got a job as a head teacher assistant for Head Start.

Head Start "definitely helped us," she said. She grew up the fourth of five children in a single-parent household with a mom who did not drive. In addition to early childhood education, Head Start provided her family with some financial security.

Decades later, she enjoys being part of Head Start because she can continue to pay forward the benefits it afforded her family when she was young.

"You're there to help families and to help children get the best start they can," she said. "There's so many people who think Head Start is just a babysitting service and it's not — they learn. Head Start helps families of low-income [families] and helps kids get that social experience they may not have."

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