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## Private schools part of 4-K effort



Tom Lynn

Navya Francis (left), 4, and Owen McGinnis, 4, work together at the Montessori School of Waukesha. The Montessori school is one of 14 private providers in the Waukesha School District's new program for 4-year-old students.

### Waukesha's program reflects statewide boom

By [Amy Hetzner](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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**Waukesha** — On the floor of a classroom colored a vibrant purple, a 4-year-old boy sits with his teacher at the Montessori School of Waukesha spelling out potential three-letter words: "rot," "mop," "sog," "col."

This is the face of public kindergarten classes for 4-year-olds in the Waukesha School District. Of the 224 students enrolled in the private school on the west side of Waukesha, 61 are there through the district's new preschool program, bringing the school \$2,880 per student in taxpayer funds.

Across town at the Waukesha Family YMCA, students from the district's 4-year-old kindergarten program attend morning and afternoon classes at a facility that boasts three different children's gyms, a preschool gymnastics room and virtual vault. Down the street, at the First Congregational United Church of Christ, Waukesha 4-year-olds can enroll in a program offered by Lutheran Social Services that also includes the opportunity of after-school care geared to students with special needs.

These, too, are part of Waukesha's new 4-year-old kindergarten program, which was administered this school year at 14 private facilities in what is perhaps the most ambitious of the community-based 4-K programs that have grown out of Wisconsin's junior kindergarten boom.

The number of state school districts offering 4-year-old kindergarten has nearly tripled in the last decade, to 335 this school year, according to the state Department of Public Instruction. Of those, 100 involved community partners in their programming.

What links such programs together is they involve spending tax dollars on non-public preschool and day care facilities. Some have district teachers deployed to private the facilities while others allow the private entities to use their own state-licensed teachers.

The main reasons for the rise in such programs involve space and economics. By partnering with existing facilities to offer 4-year-old kindergarten, school districts don't have to worry about finding new classrooms for their new students.

In addition, by paying the private organizations, school districts make sure they do not put local centers out of business and cut off other valuable services to the community, such as 3-year-old preschool and day care.

## **Oversight questioned**

But newly elected Waukesha school board member Steve Edlund questioned whether the state provides enough oversight for such community programs. He pointed to the fiscal controls the state exerts over schools in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program or the audit requirements for virtual charter schools as alternative models.

"We're giving public funds in Waukesha away," Edlund said. "We're giving public funds to a private institution to essentially run a public education system.&ensp.&ensp.&ensp.&ensp."

"We're receiving state funds to run these programs, but the state's not requiring any accountability for them financially."

School officials say they provide their own accountability.

In the Menomonee Falls School District, which has district 4-K teachers in two private facilities as well

as the district's own elementary schools, Superintendent Keith Marty said curriculum oversight was one of the reasons the district stopped allowing the private sites to use their own teachers.

"When we employ the teacher, we can observe them and evaluate them," he said. "It's a little more difficult when the teacher isn't ours to do all that."

Debbie Wells, the Waukesha district's kindergarten coordinator, acknowledges a certain amount of trust has to exist between the district and its partners in the 4-K program, where eight sites use their own teachers rather than ones from the district.

But the district has final say in which private providers can participate in the program, sets 34 different goals for children to reach by the end of the school year.

"We've built something pretty unique here, and there's a level of what I would call real collaboration," Wells said.

Community partners say they not only bring years of preschool experience to the relationship, but their employees also are helped by professional development the district requires and that can be used in other programs that serve children.

"That was one of the biggest reasons for wanting this position is growth for myself," said Angie Todd, an assistant teacher in the 4-K program at Kindergarten Preparatory Preschool.

At Kindergarten Preparatory, district teacher Cathy Kopp uses Waukesha's curriculum to teach her students such basics as spelling their names, working cooperatively and resolving conflicts peacefully.

The approach is different at the Montessori school, however, where director Bill Walsh said it was essential that the school retain its Montessori-certified teachers and teaching methods.

That required not only that the school keep its own curriculum, but that it shorten the school week to four days to preserve the three-hour uninterrupted work cycle seen as critical to students' individual and joint pursuits.

Walsh said his school was deeply involved in helping to set the students goals for Waukesha's 4-K program.

"It wasn't a matter of jumping through hoops, because we were the ones creating the hoops," he said.

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