Written by Steve Frank
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With a boost in Federal funds, Watauga County Schools pre-kindergarten (pre-k) program will be able to serve 36 additional at-risk four year olds for the 2012-13 school year. An infusion of state funding was announced by Governor Bev Perdue last month, giving Watauga another $100,000. In announcing the additional funding, the school release said that “this funding will not completely restore the cuts made to the WCS pre-k program at the start of this school year, but it will allow the addition of a class for 18 at-risk four year olds at Mabel and a class of nine at Bethel. It will also pay for increasing enrollment in the pre-k class at Valle Crucis School from nine to eighteen students.” The additional NC Pre-K funding comes from $20 million that was originally budgeted for the NC Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the funding transferred to the NC Pre-K program after it was determined that it would not be required for DHHS in the current fiscal year. The additional funds are expected to serve another 6,300 children statewide. But the money comes with some strings—that it can only be used to serve children with educational risk factors such as low household income, limited English proficiency, and learning disabilities. In past years, local school systems had some leeway to provide pre-k services for both at-risk and not at-risk children, but the release says the NC General Assembly removed that flexibility from the program. According to Watauga schools,the additional funding is already at work in the Valle Crucis pre-k classroom, with that classroom growing from nine to 15 students, soon to increase to its full enrollment of 18 students in January. The new classes at Bethel and Mabel serving a combined total of 27 students will also begin in January. Before that happens, school system personnel will have to identify the additional students to be served and complete the hiring of the additional personnel needed.

The additional students to be served will be identified in a two-step process. First, current pre-k students at Cove Creek School who live in the Bethel or Mabel district will be given the option to transfer to the new pre-k classroom at Bethel or Mabel. After any transfers are confirmed, school system officials will contact students already on pre-k waiting lists at Cove Creek, Bethel, and Mabel to fill any available spaces in their home school district. Parents of children on waiting lists will be contacted by the school system during December and do not need to initiate that contact.

The hiring process for pre-k personnel at Bethel and Mabel is already underway. “We expect to present our hiring recommendations to the Board of Education on December 10th and we plan to have the additional classes up and running on January 7th, the first day that students return to school after the winter holidays,” said WCS Director of Elementary Education Tamara Stamey.

At the start of the current school year, the pre-k program in WCS had been cut back from nine classrooms serving a total of 162 children at eight schools to five classrooms serving a total of 90 children at four schools. The cutbacks resulted from continued funding reductions at the state level and new reductions from the regional Head Start office.

A pre-k class of nine children was added back at Valle Crucis School earlier this fall, before the recent addition to NC Pre-K funding was announced. With the additional funding recently approved by Governor Perdue, the WCS pre-k program now plans to serve a total of 135 children in eight classrooms at seven schools for 2012-13. The scope of the pre-k program for the 2013-14 school year is subject to budget decisions to be made next spring.

“I think everyone involved with education at any level hopes the General Assembly and Governor-elect Pat McCrory will increase funding for pre-k classes next year,” said Stamey.

“Expanding high-quality early childhood education is probably the single most valuable investment we can make to strengthen our educational system and increase student success.”