

FWCS Pre-K Recruitment

Research

Fort Wayne Community Schools (FWCS) has offered pre-kindergarten to students in a limited number of elementary schools since 1992, although it has never been fully supported by state funding. Over the years, FWCS has used Title I funds (federal funds designated for schools with high poverty rates) and dollars set aside for the district's magnet programs to support early childhood education. Over the past decade, FWCS has added pre-K to more buildings each year with 25 buildings now offering pre-K to 4-year-old students. In addition, since 2018, FWCS has expanded pre-K from half day to full day at 16 locations. A survey of kindergarten families conducted in December 2022 showed 70% of families would have preferred a full-day program if it had been available when their child was pre-K age.

Like many urban school districts, Fort Wayne Community Schools has seen a decline in enrollment with a 9% loss over 15 years. The decline was particularly sharp during the COVID-19 pandemic with a 3% decrease year over year. For pre-K, it was even more drastic with a 24% decline from 2020 to 2021. Additionally, in 2021, the FWCS pre-K classes were at only 62% capacity.

FWCS enrollment trends show more than 90% of students who enroll in pre-K continue to kindergarten with Fort Wayne Community Schools. School districts in Indiana begin receiving funds for students beginning in kindergarten. At the current per pupil rate of \$7,802, Fort Wayne Community Schools will collect at least \$101,426 per student if they start in pre-K or kindergarten and remain enrolled through 12th grade. The return on investment is greatest when students are entering school at a young age and far greater than recruiting students at the other transition grades – sixth and ninth. Without adequate funding, FWCS cannot maintain its innovative, high quality programs.

Goal: FWCS can maximize enrollment increases by focusing on pre-K where matriculation and return on investment are greatest.

Planning

Primary Audience: Families with preschool-age children (3-4 years old)

Objective #1: Increase attendance at the March 21, 2024, Passport to Pre-K by 15%.

About 500 people attended the inaugural Passport to Pre-K event in 2003 with enrollment forms for 200 students completed within 24 hours after the event. For 2024, we wanted to see an increase in attendance and enrollments of 15%. **Total Budget:** \$16,000 (includes expenses to operate the event, including give-aways, additional staff time, rentals, etc. in addition to the costs listed below)

Strategy 1: Social Media

Our greatest social media following is on Facebook with more than 35,000 followers. We also use Instagram and X with more than 10,000 followers on each platform. Of our Facebook followers, about 20% are women between the ages of 25-34, our target audience for pre-K marketing. We created an event for the 2024 Passport to Pre-K event and posted frequently about the event. **Budget:** Staff time, no additional expense

Strategy 2: Advertising

With our target audience families who have preschool-age children, we focused our advertising efforts in areas where we could best reach such families. This included sending flyers to current families through Peachjar, delivering information to daycares within our attendance area and purchasing billboard space in high-traffic areas. **Budget:** \$5,000

Objective #2: Fill all pre-K seats for the 2024-25 school year.

Fill rate percentage is used as a measure over total number of students because of changes from half-day programs to full day programs, which are more beneficial to students socially and academically and are desired by families. When a school moves to full day, fewer slots are available for students, and the enrollment numbers do not always show an increase in student population. In 2023-24, the fill rate at the start of the school year was nearly 90%.

Strategy 1: Social Media

Working with our advertising agency, Asher, we established a digital marketing campaign targeting parents with toddlers ages 1-2 or preschoolers ages 3-5 who reside in identified zip codes and also have an interest in preschool. **Budget:** \$1,000

Strategy 2: Targeted Marketing

The majority of our pre-K programs are located within neighborhood elementary schools. After the initial round of applications were received in March, we re-evaluated with the Title I Pre-K Team where we needed to focus our marketing efforts. For 5 schools, we purchased banners to hang in the front lawn with a QR code for registration. The Student Recruitment & Retention Team canvassed neighborhoods in four attendance areas, talking with parents and hanging posters in businesses to increase awareness. **Budget:** \$1,000

Implementation

The Communication & Marketing Team, in partnership with the Title I Pre-K Team, planned and executed the Passport to Pre-K recruitment event. We welcomed families to a free, fun, information event where they could meet school staff, learn about pre-K programs, register for pre-K, meet community partners, receive vaccinations, play games and have their photos taken. Promotion of the event included strategically placed billboards in English and Spanish, social media, participating in a Baby Fair for new parents, earned media, television and newspaper advertisements and flyer distribution to current families. Social media and targeted marketing continued through the summer to promote registration prior to the start of the 2024=25 school year.

Evaluation

Objective #1: Increase attendance at the March 21, 2024, Passport to Pre-K by 15%.

About 800 people attended the event with more than 300 applications completed within 24 hours of Passport to Pre-K, surpassing our target.

Objective #2: Fill all pre-K seats for the 2024-25 school year.

At the beginning of the 2024-25 school year, virtually every seat was accounted for in our pre-K programs. In fact, many programs had a waiting list, prompting the opening of a new classroom in October, which was filled prior to opening. On official enrollment count day, FWCS had 1,003 students enrolled in pre-K for 4-year-olds, up from 940 in 2023.