

## **House Select Committee Presentation, 11-3-2011**

### **Bill Batts, Wayne County, Administrator/Owner, Small World Child Care Center and Small World, Too!**

My name is Bill Batts and I am the Administrator and Co-Owner of Small World Child Care Center & Small World, Too! We are a small family-owned and operated business and have been providing child care services to families for 30 years (since 1981). We are located about 50 miles east of Raleigh in Goldsboro (Wayne County), home of Seymour Johnson AFB. Presently, Small World serves about 375 children and their families ranging from ages two to 13, including five NC Pre-K classrooms.

Small World was a pilot program for More at Four in the 2001-2002 school year and has provided More at Four/NC Pre-K services continuously since the first year of the program. We were awarded additional pre-k classrooms through the years and were providing services in six classrooms last year. Wayne County provides NC Pre-K services in public school, Head Start, and private child care settings. Currently, Wayne County serves 543 children-down from 678 children last year. Of these 135 slot cuts, Small World lost a full classroom of 18 slots.

Although our county has our particular disagreements concerning the NC Pre-K program, I feel very fortunate when I hear of the trials and tribulations other counties across the state are having with their programs! Wayne County's NC Pre-K program is administered through our local Smart Start partnership and has all of the diverse service delivery providers at the table (public schools, Head Start, and private child care providers), as originally envisioned in the pre-k program.

I want to share with you today some of the advantages of having private child care centers provide NC Pre-K services, as well some of the challenges we have faced and improvements we have made over the years. The advantages of having private child care centers provide NC Pre-K services are many:

- Existing infrastructure of physical properties and local community relationships are utilized.
- Opportunity for children to receive care before and after the NC Pre-K instructional day to meet the needs of working families without an additional transition. This also includes care when school is out for teacher workdays, early dismissals, bad weather days, and holidays.
- Siblings can be cared for in the same location, meeting an essential need for families.
- Teachers in licensed private centers maintain the same standards as public school teachers, including licensure requirements. Highly qualified teachers also provide an added benefit of assistance and encouragement for other center teachers, benefiting other children in the center and creating an environment for whole center improvement.
- Private childcare centers are already thoroughly regulated and are familiar with environmental health and safety issues, including playground and outside spaces, and are already providing a safe environment especially designed for children of this age group.
- Private childcare centers are required to be built, furnished, and maintained to provide services specifically for this age group.
- Private childcare centers have been providing pre-k services for at-risk children and families through the DSS Child Care Subsidy program for many years – their experience is an asset to families, public school systems and the state.
- The quality of licensed private child care centers is evidenced by our significant contributions to the success of NC model programs, including Smart Start, T.E.A.C.H, WAGE\$, the Star Rated License, and More at Four.

- Families have direct access to the private center's Administration on a daily basis, and thus have a greater degree of flexibility and choice, which adds value and is good for them.
- Families who need continuation of child care during the summer months have already established a relationship with the private center and can eliminate an additional transition for the child before kindergarten.

Some challenges that licensed private providers have faced during our years of providing More at Four/NC Pre-K services include:

- The big one – only partial funding of the pre-k program. This has been a widely acknowledged problem since the beginning of the program. Although I certainly understand the economic challenges involved, I am still faced with the reality of having to meet the program teacher salary requirements, as well as the high cost of providing a quality curriculum and a multitude of assessment materials. This challenge multiplies each year as my teachers earn experience and move higher on the pay scale.
- Public school system recruitment of teachers – it is hard to compete with the state benefit package (state health plan and defined benefit retirement plan).
- Since the pre-k program has necessarily developed and adapted over time, we have had to make several adjustments to our policies and procedures, many times in very short notice.
- Funding reductions often lead to a loss of classrooms.
- In addition to the partial funding of the NC Pre-K slot reimbursement, funding that provided help for qualifying families toward before- and after-care was eliminated. Since the pre-k slot reimbursement is underfunded, we must utilize a strategy of combining all available funding streams, as well as having our pre-k classrooms used as multi-use classrooms.

Some improvements that have been experienced over the years include:

- Being invited as a partner in qualifying children's IEP (Individual Education Plan) process, along with families and appropriate specialists (coordinated by our local school system)
- The Teacher Mentoring and Evaluation Program that provides a pathway for teacher licensure in the private child care setting
- The emergence of a multi-dimensional consensus and awareness of the importance of early childhood education in the "big picture" of human development, and the consequences of lost opportunities
- A greater awareness, promotion, and cooperation of inclusion for all children in all child care settings made possible by collaboration of the service providers of the NC Pre-K community
- Hopefully, a permanent home for the NC Pre-K program at DCDEE, which should provide stability and a natural home for pre-k services

In closing, I would just like to say that I am personally excited about the increasing and ongoing collaboration between our local child care providers, child therapy and inclusion specialists, and our local Smart Start Partnership in Wayne County – although, I recognize that this type of collaboration is not occurring in many counties across the state. I hope that will change for the benefit of the children and families that we all serve. I am also optimistic about the opportunity to continue to work with state leaders like you in the months ahead to make sure we meet the needs of North Carolina's at-risk four-year-olds and overcome our current pre-k challenges. Thank you for your time and attention today.