

Early school piques interest

Chapel Hill-Carrboro must decide whether to launch a prototype that puts 3-year-olds in school

Patrick Winn, Staff Writer

CHAPEL HILL - A leading child development institute based at UNC-Chapel Hill wants to revolutionize education by enrolling 3-year-olds in public school.

Now, after more than a year of negotiations, Chapel Hill-Carrboro school leaders must decide whether to launch the concept's prototype.

The latest proposal, to be reviewed by the school board Thursday, would create a model school on the Seawell Elementary campus where students would start at age 3 and continue through fifth grade.

Increasingly, public schools are offering preschool classes. But the programs don't always emphasize education, and the teachers are not always well-qualified, according to a study of 240 state-funded preschools in six states.

Researchers at UNC's Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute say quality education from ages 3 to 8 is crucial and that FirstSchool, the institute's name for its early schooling concept, would start all children on a

PUBLIC SCHOOL AT AGE 3?

The Chapel Hill-Carrboro school board will discuss the new FirstSchool proposal from the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at 7 p.m. Thursday at Chapel Hill Town Hall. For details, go to www.fpg.unc.edu/~firstschool.

level playing field, said Sharon Ritchie, co-director of the project.

The curriculum would carry children from preschool years through second grade, a more natural turning point than fifth grade, traditionally the last year of elementary school, the researchers say.

School systems in Miami, Chicago and as close as Hillsborough have shown interest.

If the institute has its way, however, the concept's first steps would take place in Chapel Hill.

"Their interest is in getting people to consider educating 3- and 4-year-olds in public school as the norm," Superintendent Neil Pedersen said.

"And we're fully supportive of promoting higher-quality preschool experiences."

The main challenges, he said, will be funding and making sure already successful schools don't lose their identities.

Parents and teachers flinched when the institute first proposed building FirstSchool in 2009 behind Seawell Elementary on university-owned land. The school would have taught students starting at age 3 and turned them over to Seawell after second grade.

"They didn't like that one little bit," Ritchie said. "They said, 'We're used to knowing kids from kindergarten until the time they leave. Don't take that away from us.' "

The new proposal calls for one school with one leader. It would be located at Seawell Elementary and would keep the name Seawell Elementary, not FirstSchool. It would take about 750 students, from 3-year-olds to fifth-graders, from the Seawell assignment zone.

The school would either be located on Seawell's current campus, or the whole school would move to a nearby site on UNC-owned land.

The compromises have moved the Seawell community from fearful to intrigued,

principal Susan Pegg said: "The whole idea of having a partially new campus where everyone stays together is exciting."

FirstSchool planners insist they want to adapt to school systems, not take them over.

"These are district schools. Not ours," Ritchie said. "We're not interested in coming in and peopling schools with our own staff. We're just trying to provide guidance."

Still, funding remains a big hurdle. FirstSchool planners have been working off a \$2 million planning grant. Another \$1.6 million is set aside to plan construction. None of that will go toward building and staffing a school.

"That's the biggest thing," Ritchie said. "How are we going to share the financing?"

Eventually, the institute hopes to convince political leaders that this take on preschool is worth funding nationwide.

They'll also have to convince the parents who elect them.

"I want to believe, in theory, that this would be a successful endeavor," said Marc ter Horst, whose daughter attends Seawell Elementary. "But can it be done in a way that doesn't significantly disrupt what's happening now?"

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