



PRESS RELEASE

Dawson Education Cooperative Partners With Local School Districts To Form Garland County Pre-K Consortium

July 7, 2016: The Dawson Education Cooperative in Arkadelphia has partnered with the Hot Springs, Cutter Morning Star, Lakeside, Fountain Lake, Mountain Pine, and Jessierville School Districts to provide a preschool program for students in the Garland County area. The partnership, commonly referred to as the Garland County Pre-K Consortium, will be housed in the Hot Springs School District's former Summit Alternative Learning Environment building at 220 Tom Ellsworth Drive. The program, made possible through an Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) grant, will serve a maximum of 120 three and four year old children.

This idea of Garland County Pre-K expansion began during meetings of the Greater Hot Springs Education Council, co-chaired by Les Warren of Hot Springs Title Company and Dr. John Hogan of National Park College. The council consists of all seven Garland County school district superintendents, as well as the elected Garland County State Senators and Representatives and is hosted by the Greater Hot Springs Chamber of Commerce. According to the most recent Department of Human Services (DHS) data, there are 1,704 three-four year olds eligible for Pre-K services with only 657 Head Start and ABC Pre-K available slots. The council felt it was needed to expand services for families, particularly in light of Pre-K expansion becoming a major focus of the Hot Springs Chamber of Commerce from the May 18th *One Voice Summit* held in Hot Springs.

The seven Garland County school districts have been working hard with their communities to expand Pre-K services in recent years. Fountain Lake offers Universal Pre-K to 4 year olds living in their district at no charge. The other five districts, Hot Springs, Cutter, Lakeside, Mountain Pine and Jessierville, currently and will continue to offer, ABC Pre-K education at their individual sites, but do not have enough slots to satisfy the entire applicable age student population. Lake Hamilton is in the process of constructing new Pre-K classrooms that will allow them to offer classes for the first time during the 2017-2018 school year.

Funding has been one of the biggest obstacles facing Pre-K offering in schools. With current funding designed only for grades K-12, Pre-K is dependent on federal or state grant availability. A second issue in Pre-K expansion involves adequate physical space. Most buildings are designed to hold K-12 students. Three and four year old students may require different furniture, playground equipment and other features to fulfill early childhood accommodations.

As a first step in the Garland County Pre-K expansion effort, six of the school districts, Jessieville, Fountain Lake, Lakeside, Mt. Pine, Cutter-Morning Star, and Hot Springs began working with the Dawson Education Cooperative to write a consortium application to the Department of Human Services requesting an additional 320 ABC slots for the 2016-2017 school year. Hot Springs School district offered the use of the building on Tom Ellsworth Drive for the Pre-K Center. DHS awarded the consortium with 120 slots which will bring approximately 12-15 new jobs to the area and \$600,000 in new revenue for its funding. The cost of operations should be negligible to the consortium member districts as it will be ABC funded. Hot Springs School District superintendent Dr. Mike Hernandez said, "This is a great opportunity for the families of Garland County. I think this is just the beginning of what we can do as an education community when we all work together." Lakeside School District Superintendent Shawn Cook has seen a tremendous difference in students after going through the Lakeside Pre-K program. He is thankful for the partnership and the opportunities it presents. "Pre-K education is the best use of funding for kids" said Cook.

Enrollment for the Garland County Schools' Pre-K for the new 2016-2017 school year slots is now open. For more information please contact Tanika Flannigan with the Dawson Coop at (870)-246-3077 or email tanikaf@dawsonesc.com

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