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Report: UPSTART program is showing results in Grand County

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The first 30 graduates of the preschool program Utah Preparing Students Today for a Rewarding Tomorrow (UPSTART) are doing very well academically as kindergarteners, according to a recent report to the Grand County Board of Education. In addition, local UPSTART representatives say that more than 98 percent of participants’ parents felt the program was beneficial and prepared their child for kindergarten.

“I interviewed the kindergarten teachers and the UPSTART kids had more letter and number recognition than those who did not participate in the program,” said Moab Valley Multicultural Center Executive Director Rhiana Medina, who acts as a liaison for the UPSTART program in Moab. “Second-language learners who participated in UPSTART were ahead [in comparison] to second-language learners not in the program.”

The free in-home, computer-based preschool program requires 15 minutes of computer time five days a week and focuses on reading, math and science lessons.

The Waterford Institute, which developed the program, provides a computer and Internet access to families that may need them to participate, said Grand County School District Superintendent Scott Crane.

“If someone doesn't have computer or Internet access, they can get it on a limited, structured basis and kids can have that opportunity in their homes to have those programs,” Crane said. “Getting kids online doing the Waterford program will really help them prepare for school. Kindergarten and first grade have the same program, so it really integrates well. It’s interactive, fun for the kids. It’s a great learning tool.”

School board president Jim Webster said having a program like UPSTART in the Moab community reaches kids who may not otherwise go to preschool, thereby preparing more
It’s a great thing along with all the preschool programs we have in this community. It’s all moving in the right direction to get young children more prepared to go to school,” Webster said. “The UPSTART program reaches a few kids that otherwise wouldn’t go to preschool. By expanding with the UPSTART program, and along with the community preschools that already exist, there are just all these efforts to get more children exposed to what it’s like to become a student.”

UPSTART expanded beyond the Wasatch Front in 2013, when a federal grant allowed the nonprofit to offer the program to 18 rural Utah communities throughout the state, including Grand County, said Claudia Miner, vice-president of development at the Waterford Institute.

On average, UPSTART children enter school at a “kindergarten advanced” reading level with double the academic growth rates than those not in the program, Miner said.

“When the UPSTART program was established by the [Utah] Legislature, they put in an external evaluator,” Miner said. “That evaluator has shown that UPSTART has two to three times the learning gains before school starts than the control group does.”

Helen M. Knight kindergarten teacher Kathleen Crane said the school district already uses Waterford Institute software in kindergarten and first grade. Crane said the UPSTART students transitioned well into kindergarten.

“They’re certainly ready to learn and they have a broad experience base,” she said. “They seem to have really good concentration and attention skills as well as good grasp of pre-kindergarten concepts.”

Some local parents, including Laura Haley, chose to place their kids in a live preschool in conjunction with the UPSTART program. According to Haley, the combination allowed her daughter to work on social skills during the preschool classes and then work on an individualized academic program through UPSTART.

“[UPSTART] worked really well for her. I felt like it was really important for her to have it in tandem with regular preschool because she needed that social experience that being with other kids and other people could give her,” Haley said. “There are certainly things a preschool program like UPSTART can’t offer, but for those kids who aren’t going to preschool, it’s really a great thing for them to have that exposure.”

Haley said UPSTART helped her daughter with some basic skills, and she entered kindergarten at a first-grade reading level.
“Of course there’s a lot of factors that play into that, but UPSTART definitely helped her with the basic phonics,” Haley said. “It was all songs and games. What kid doesn't like playing on the computer?”

The UPSTART program is now accepting registration for children who will be of age to enter kindergarten in 2017. To qualify for the upcoming class, Medina said children must be 4 years old by Sept. 1, 2016.

For more information about UPSTART, contact the Moab Valley Multicultural Center at 435-259-5444.

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