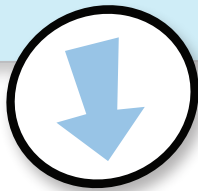
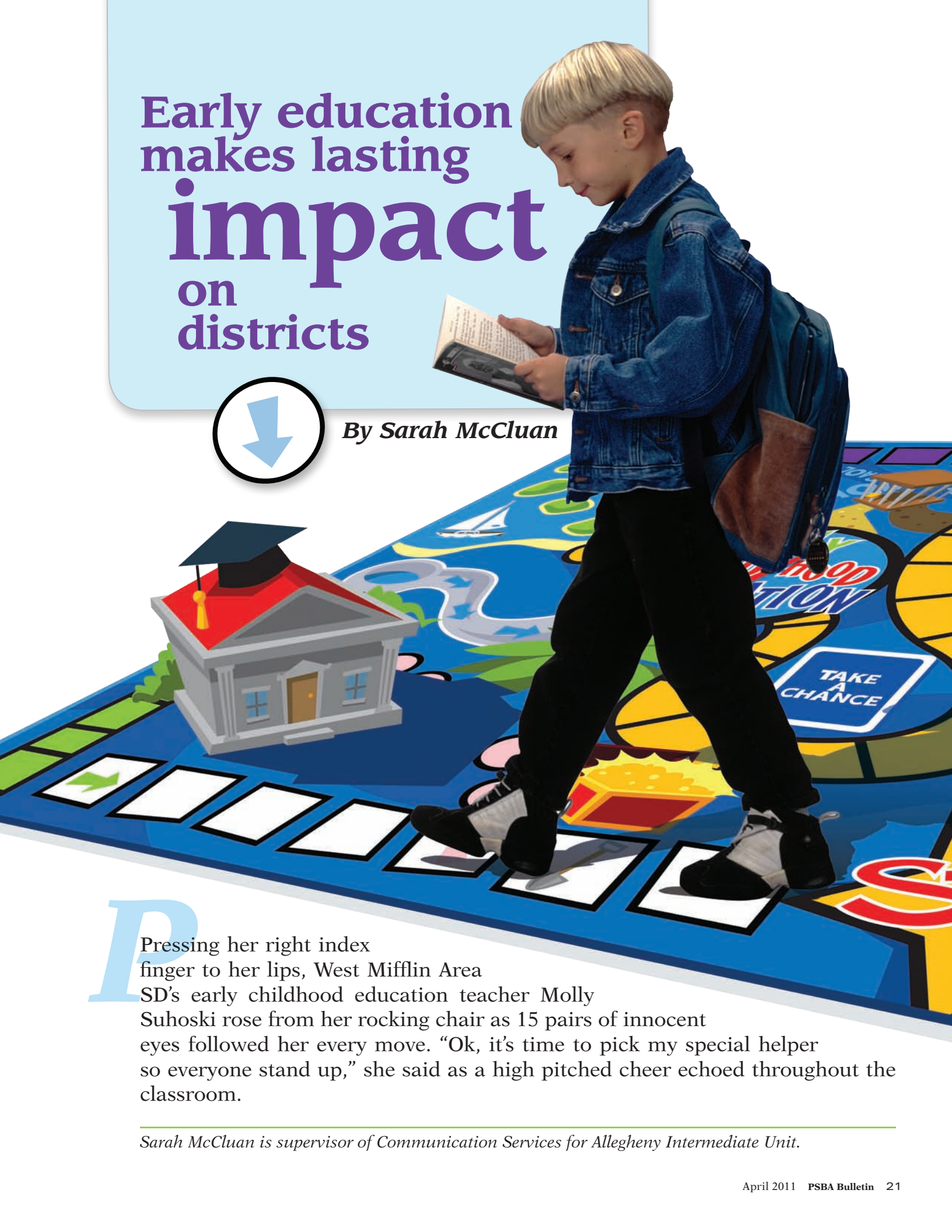


Early education makes lasting impact on districts



By Sarah McCluan



Pressing her right index finger to her lips, West Mifflin Area SD's early childhood education teacher Molly Suhoski rose from her rocking chair as 15 pairs of innocent eyes followed her every move. "Ok, it's time to pick my special helper so everyone stand up," she said as a high pitched cheer echoed throughout the classroom.

Sarah McCluan is supervisor of Communication Services for Allegheny Intermediate Unit.



Jaylyn Dimpel (*bottom*) and Cayden Kellington (*top*) are two students who attend early childhood education classes at West Mifflin Area School District.

As the group of 4-year-olds scampered to their feet, many were already excitedly waiving their hands, volunteering to be that special helper of the day.

After the class answered a series of questions, Emily Manns was chosen and proudly stepped to the front of the room, ready to help Suhoski lead the class in an alphabet lesson.

Emily and her classmates are part of a growing number of children who are benefiting from early childhood education classes specifically designed for those who are younger than five years old. By engaging in activities that promote literacy and success in a structured environment, children who attend early childhood courses learn more at an earlier age, are more prepared for kindergarten and are better behaved in elementary school.

Children who attend early childhood courses learn more at an earlier age, are more prepared for kindergarten and are better behaved in elementary school.

Evidence of the success of these programs is no longer just anecdotal. Many districts have observed that children who attend early childhood programs such as Head Start or Pennsylvania's Pre-K Counts are scoring higher on Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessments, which measure early literacy skills. West Mifflin's superintendent Dr. Janet Sardon said that in her district both parents and teachers have seen the difference early instruction can make.

"The studies have shown over and over that early instruction makes a huge difference in performance. On the DIBELS assessment, the difference is enormous," she said.

Early childhood education has its roots in the Johnson administration, which oversaw the advent of the nation's Head Start program in 1965. Originally an eight-week summer course for children from economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, Head Start grew steadily and by the Reagan administration, the program was serving more than nine million students across the country.

Children from all communities and socio-economic groups reap academic and social benefits when they are enrolled in early childhood programs. According to studies from Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child and the American Academy of Pediatrics, a child's learning and cognitive development truly begins at birth as nerve connections associated with language and other functions develop. By taking advantage of this rapid growth, early childhood instruction helps students form early patterns of success, which translate directly into higher academic achievement, smooth transitions into kindergarten, fewer special education costs for school districts, and, some would contend, more success in adult life.

In recent years, many school districts, recognizing the enormous academic and economic benefits of early childhood education, have incorporated these classes into their busy schedules and curricula. The Allegheny Intermediate Unit (AIU), which serves 42 school districts in Pittsburgh's suburban neighborhoods, has many partners throughout the region, and operates several early childhood programs including Head Start, Early Head Start and Pre-K Counts. Of the 29 intermediate units across the commonwealth, many offer the same or similar programming. Dr. Barbara Minzenberg, the AIU's director of Early Childhood, Family and Community Services, said that partnerships formed with school districts are vital to providing supports to those who need them the most.

"Our programs are pure partnerships – we do not charge school districts for these ser-

vices and we've really developed some wonderful classrooms where children can learn so they are successful in kindergarten and beyond," she said.

One of these partners is the Elizabeth Forward SD, located in southern Allegheny County, which supports several early childhood programs including Pre-K Counts, Head Start and DART Preschool Early Intervention (Discovery, Assessment, Referral and Tracking). Superintendent Dr. Bart Rocco said that these services assist educators by identifying children who may have special education needs, thereby helping the district save on their special education costs.

"There's no doubt about it that these services help with social development and early identification issues. To me, that is really critical. Prior to these [classes], we would have a child with an IEP but have no knowledge of their previous progress. Now because we can plan, we can budget. There is definitely a cost savings," he said.

Several studies concur with Rocco's observations, including the Pennsylvania Build Initiative, titled "The Cost Savings to Special Education from Pre-Schooling in Pennsylvania." The study concluded that approximately \$102 million in special education costs could be saved if pre-kindergarten programming was made available to all families. Special education services, which are regulated by the state and federal governments, can consume a large portion of a school district's budget, a reality of which administrators are keenly aware.

Although financial rewards can be realized early in a child's education, the academic awards continue to compound like a healthy mutual fund. High-quality early education leads to higher third-grade literacy levels, a key indicator of future high school dropout rates, as reported by the "Kids Count 2010 Special Report" funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.



Children from all communities and socio-economic groups reap academic and social benefits when they are enrolled in early childhood programs.



Although financial rewards can be realized early in a child's education, the academic awards continue to compound like a healthy mutual fund.

According to the study, third-grade reading levels are also linked to an individual's life-long earning potential.

Dr. Lucille Abellonio, superintendent of Allegheny County's Clairton City SD, agreed. Her district is a long-time supporter of early childhood education, having partnered with the AIU's DART program for the last 35 years. The district also supports Pre-K Counts and Head Start programming. Abellonio said the programs not only accelerate academic achievement, but also provide a seamless transition into kindergarten for both students and their families.

"Kindergarten can be a scary time for children, but also for parents – sometimes our activities are more for them than the children," she said.

Throughout the year, the district holds transition programs during which young children meet their kindergarten teachers and prepare to go to the "big school." The Clairton community embraces early childhood education and regularly participates in school-related events. In the past, children in the district's early childhood education classes have marched with Clairton kindergarteners in a community parade celebrating the Week of the Young Child. While these and other transition activities help families an-

ticipate changes in their daily lives, it also allows teachers and administrators to prepare to meet the needs of each student.

In western Montgomery County, the Pottstown SD actively works with parents and community organizations to ensure that all children have access to high-quality early childhood education experiences. Together with several local partners, the school district operates the Pottstown Early Action for Kindergarten Readiness (PEAK) initiative in an effort to coordinate services

for young children. Dr. Jeffrey Sparagana, Pottstown's assistant superintendent and PEAK's senior administrator, estimates that the program currently serves about 80% of the district's three- and four-year-olds, many of whom reside in low-income households. Since the program began four years ago, the number of students who have scored at benchmark on their DIBELS scores has risen from 45% to 56%. Sparagana credits the program's success to the dedication of the community and its belief in the importance of early childhood education.

"This is one of the most cohesive partnerships I've ever worked with," Sparagana said.

In an effort to ensure that the PEAK initiative continuously improves the quality of its offerings, the Pottstown SD and its partners early on committed to the Keystone STARS program. Managed by the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL), Keystone STARS is a tool that allows families to determine the quality of early learning services. The program

measures four areas: family and community partnerships, leadership management, learning environment and staff education. PEAK's yearly outcomes reflect these, and include gains in family engagement, community outreach, quality improvement and child outcomes. All of PEAK's managing partners that are community child care providers participate in Keystone STARS and all have earned a rating of Star 3 or higher.

"We have set goals around professional development and have used the Keystone STARS as the measurement mechanism," Sparagana said.

But high-quality early childhood education is not limited to the classroom setting. The AIU's Early Head Start program, which serves infants, toddlers, pregnant women and their families, offers weekly home visits as well as play and parenting groups. During home visits, nurses and other specialists work with families to monitor

a child's development by promoting prenatal health services, providing family support and organizing play groups and parent meetings. Programs like Early Head Start, which features home visitation services, can provide valuable support to low-income families that benefit both child and parent.

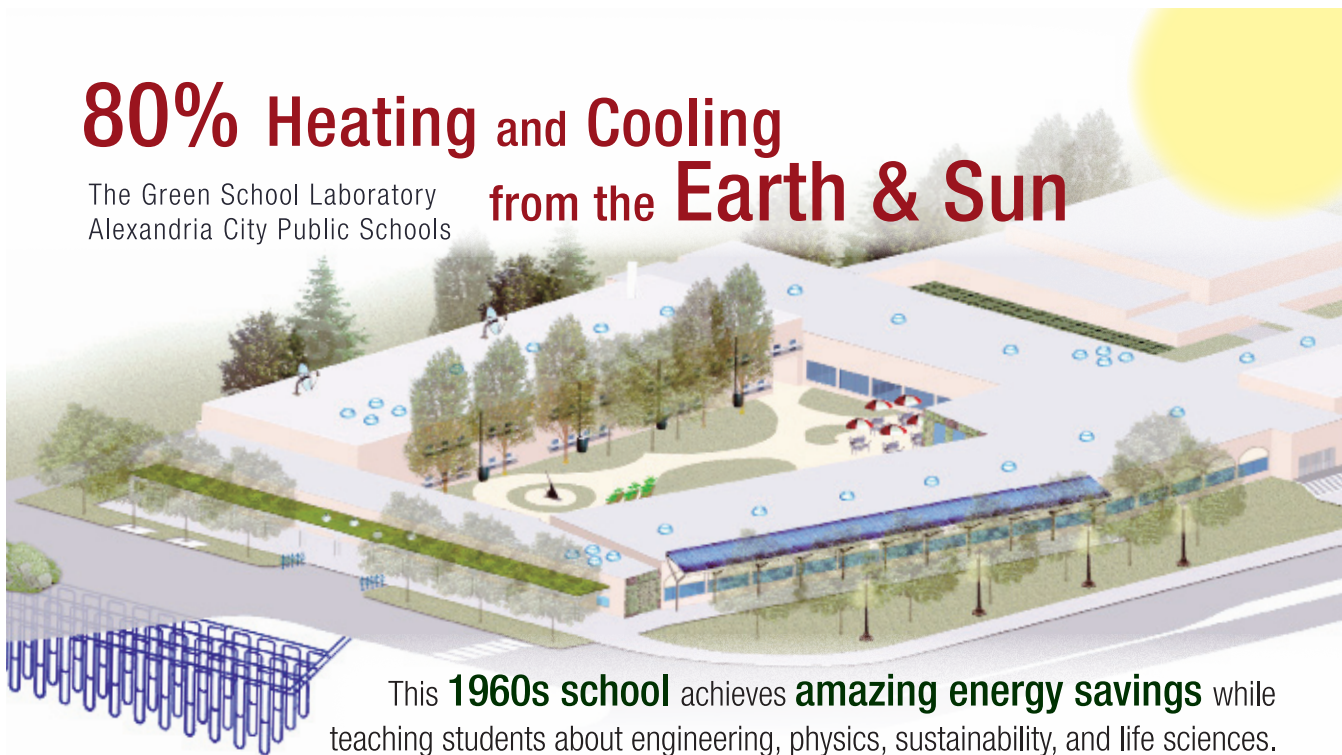
Back at the West Mifflin Area SD, the district's youngest students continue to take small steps to the rest of their lives, quickly absorbing literacy and social lessons that will help them be successful in school. As he walked around the early childhood classroom, Principal Michael Sable grinned as he watched the students at work.

"They catch on so fast, it's amazing. Because of these classes, our kids are really much further ahead, so much so that in this district, kindergarten is the new first grade," he said.

A win-win situation for everyone. **b**

80% Heating and Cooling from the Earth & Sun

The Green School Laboratory
Alexandria City Public Schools



This **1960s school** achieves **amazing energy savings** while teaching students about engineering, physics, sustainability, and life sciences.



HAYES LARGE

Architecture MEP Engineering
Landscape Architecture Sustainability

Brad Furey, REFP

888.809.6134

www.hayeslarge.com