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State Temporarily Adjusts Eligibility Requirements to Offer Free Preschool to More Families

Slots open throughout the region for 4-year-old students

TRAVERSE CITY, Mich. — It's not all bad news when it comes to availability of quality and affordable preschool for children in northern Michigan. The Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP) currently has openings for 4-year-old children at its centers in Antrim, Benzie, Grand Traverse, Kalkaska and Leelanau counties, and more families can access the high-quality preschool programming due to the temporary adjustment of eligibility requirements.

There are currently openings for 85 children throughout the region. Availability will vary based on location, but families of all income levels can now access GSRP by submitting an application. Some may need to pay a one-time fee for tuition that is based on income.

Traditionally, income is one factor considered in determining whether a family is eligible for free GSRP preschool, along with situations such as a child's disabilities, behavioral concerns, language barriers, abuse or neglect, and environmental risks. However, the state has released new guidance removing these requirements to allow all families to be considered for enrollment once efforts to enroll traditionally eligible students have been attempted. The new guidance is due to an above-average number of open slots in GSRP centers and will remain in place for the rest of the 2023-24 school year.

Northwest Education Services (North Ed) and GSRP, in collaboration with local child care providers, operate several preschool program options that are free and provide excellent opportunities for children to learn in safe, encouraging environments while preparing them for kindergarten. Each program meets the needs of families, regardless of socioeconomic status.

GSRP serves children by helping them establish basic skills in the areas of social interaction, play, language, emotional development, early literacy and fine motor skills. Such development in early childhood can have positive long-term impacts that can lead to reading at grade level, graduating high school and being career-ready later in life.

North Ed's Early Childhood Supervisor Dr. Yvonne Donohoe explains, "Although many children begin preschool in the fall, it is almost always a good time to introduce kids to quality preschool programming and a supportive educational atmosphere like we have in GSRP. Plus, the wide range of families who qualify can significantly benefit from a free program rather than needlessly paying for other care or preschool."

All are encouraged to inquire about GSRP availability and eligibility. Contact Help Me Grow Northwest at 231.922.7878 or HelpMeGrow@NorthwestEd.org. Families and caregivers may also visit www.helpmegrow-mi.org/northwest to be connected to resources like child care and preschool options, and developmental screening tools.

While the income eligibility requirements have been adjusted for the remainder of the school year, Michigan law allows for any child whose family income is at or below 300% of the federal poverty level to be eligible for GSRP. Translated into dollars and cents, that means a family of four with an annual income of \$83,250 or less would be eligible for the free preschool.

North Ed works in partnership with GSRP, local school districts, community-based providers and Northwest Michigan Community Action Agency (NMCAA) to provide quality preschool education throughout the northwest Michigan service area.

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