

First in line for bilingual ed

Schools struggle to meet new law for preschoolers

By **Tara Malone**
TRIBUNE REPORTER

With his navy slacks and dress shirt still creased from his mother's iron, 4-year-old Edenzoe Diaz reported for his first day of preschool to learn his letters in English and Spanish.

He got his first lesson as he stepped into the classroom. Teacher Tania Miranda asked her newest student to copy the letters of his name onto an attendance sheet.

"Primero, esta letra," Miranda said, pointing to the "E" on his nametag.

Edenzoe speaks no English, his mother said. But in this bilingual classroom at Chicago's Edwards Center for Young Learners — a public school in the shadow of Midway Airport — he will receive the same support that for years has been offered starting in kindergarten.

As the school year begins, Illinois becomes the first state to mandate that public schools with preschool programs offer a bilingual education to 3- and 4-year-olds who don't speak English.

Under the new regulations, school officials must determine whether students speak another language at home and measure how well they speak and understand English. They then must offer those who need it a seat in a bilingual preschool class, where they study basic academic skills in their native language as they learn English.

But from Carpentersville to Champaign, local school districts are hurrying to comply with the requirements that come without additional fund-

ing, even as they brace for another year of dwindling reserves and funding delays.

"It seems as though this is just creating a problem unnecessarily," said Superintendent Roger Prosise, of Diamond Lake School District 76, where nearly a quarter of the district's 1,170 students are new to English.

Calling preschool the new front door to the school system,

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education experts say the change could help to narrow the academic divide.

"If you start early, there's a very good promise that you will not have achievement-gap issues later on," said Eugene Garcia, an education professor at Arizona State University and former chair of the National Task Force for the Early Education of Hispanics. "What Illinois has done is take the lead in the state policy arena."

The mandate covers 585 preschool programs run and funded by public districts, serving about 85,000 students, state officials said. It stems from a 2009 state law that extended bilingual services to preschool. The new rules laid out what was expected.

One of the most worrisome changes for school administrators is a requirement that by 2014, teachers in bilingual preschool classes must be certified in bilingual instruction or English as a second language as addition to early childhood education.

But the supply of educa-

tors holding both certifications doesn't currently meet the demand.

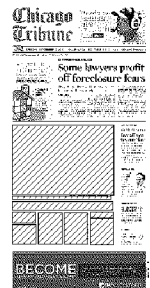
Cicero School District 99 started urging preschool teachers to get their bilingual credentials two years ago. In the west suburb — where more than half of its 13,700 students speak limited English — 6 of 36 preschool sections are bilingual, Superintendent Donna Adamic said. But most still rely on a Spanish-speaking aide to help the English-speaking teachers.

"We have as many bilingual teachers as we can possibly find," said Adamic, noting the district even recruited educators from Spain. "It's not like you can just go out tomorrow and hire 10 of them."

Preschool teacher Victoria Quillen took night and summer classes to earn her certification to teach English as a second language from the Erickson Institute in Chicago.

"For most of these kids, it's the very first time in school. So, I do a lot of things in English and Spanish to help them understand," said Quillen, who teaches at Cicero West Elementary School.

In Mundelein, Diamond Lake School District 76 devotes two classrooms to preschool, teaching children their letters and numbers primarily in English. A Spanish-speaking aide helps students who need a hand in their native language. Both teachers are studying for a certificate in English as a second lan-



guage.

Prorise said parents signed waivers because the program does not square with the new state policy.

"This will impact my district in a significant way because neither of my pre-K teachers is bilingual," he said.

Many cash-strapped schools worry how to shoulder the costs of the new requirements as their preschool budgets already have been slashed. Of the 199 comments submitted about the new rules, "a lack of funding was an overarching concern," according to state officials.

West Chicago School District 33 reduced its preschool program from 13 classes to seven this year and went from serving 300 students — all of them low-income or new to English — to 80, said Sandy Warner, principal of early childhood education.

"The only factor is funding. That's going to dictate the number of students served," said Kristina Davis-Salazar, the district's director of second-language learning.

Eight percent of the state's 2.1 million public school students speak limited English, a number that grew in size and spread geographically during the past decade, state records show. Most of them are in the first years of school. In 2008, for instance, 13,782 children enrolled in bilingual preschool programs

that received state funds, according to a report by the Illinois State Board of Education. That was up from 828 students 10 years earli-



Amberlynn Ramos, 4, is excited that there will be pizza for lunch in her class at Edwards Academy for Young Learners.

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Educators expect the number will continue to grow as districts assess incoming preschoolers.

Under existing Illinois law, schools must offer a bilingual classroom when at least 20 students share a native language other than English. When there are fewer students, English as a second language is offered.

"What we don't want to do is just throw children into an English-speaking program without any sup-

port when they are supposed to learn reading, writing and arithmetic. That's really our major concern," said Barbara Bowman, the acting chief officer of early childhood education for Chicago Public Schools.

On a recent afternoon at Edwards Academy for Young Learners, where a third of the Chicago school's 187 students take bilingual classes, Miranda helped her preschoolers settle into their new routine.

They wrote their names on the attendance sheet, snacked on pizza and carrots, and headed to the alphabet rug for story time. Miranda lifted a copy of Judy Hindley's book "Eyes, Nose, Fingers and Toes" for her students to see.

"Cómo se dice 'head' en Español?" she asked. "La cabeza," they called in response.

Miranda, who speaks English and Spanish, is completing her bilingual teaching certificate. She spends about 90 percent of her day in Spanish, but she teaches students the letters in both languages, sings songs in both languages and gives them books in both languages when possible.

Head teacher Oriana Wilson said the school urged teachers to earn their bilingual certification even before the new law.

"Yes, it's a piece of paper," she said. "But it's also a reflection of our students."

EXPERTS SAY ILLINOIS MAKES PRESCHOOL A PRIORITY

For years, Illinois officials have focused on serving the state's youngest students. Education experts say Illinois offers a model of how to make preschool — including programs that serve toddlers to 3-year-olds — a priority.

Here are some key milestones:

1985: The state's preschool program begins exclusively for 3- to 5-year-olds at risk of academic failure.

1997: Lawmakers create the Early Childhood Block Grant, combining funding for preschool, parent train-

ing and prevention initiatives that target at-risk children. At least 8 percent is reserved for infants and toddlers.

2003: The Illinois Early Learning Council begins research on how to create a top-notch, accessible and comprehensive educational system for infants on up.

2003: Lawmakers raise to 11 percent the portion of the Early Childhood Block Grant set aside for infants and toddlers.

2004: State begins funding preschools run by school districts and community organizations.

2006: With "Preschool for All,"

Illinois launches the nation's first effort to offer preschool to all 3- and 4-year-olds. Students at risk of academic failure are served first.

2008: Lawmakers extend Preschool for All through 2010.

2010: Illinois school districts must begin offering bilingual services to preschool students who don't speak English.

2010: Lawmakers lift the sunset date on Preschool for All, ensuring that universal access to preschool remains law in Illinois.

Sources: Ounce of Prevention Fund, Tribune reporting



Preschoolers line up for recess at Chicago's Edwards Center for Young Learners. Illinois is the first state to require public schools with pre-school programs to offer a bilingual education to children who don't speak English. **NANCY STONE/TRIBUNE PHOTO**



Students play outside at the Southwest Side's Edwards Academy for Young Learners. Illinois is the first state to require bilingual programs for preschoolers. **NANCY STONE/TRIBUNE PHOTOS**