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One Preschool Classroom Finally Opens, But Many Families are Still Waiting

SOUTH HAVEN – By the time Head Start teacher Julie Williams opened her classroom on Monday, her fifteen 3- and 4-year-old students had waited more than a month for school to start. Williams wanted to open her classroom as soon as possible, but first she needed an associate teacher.

“For safety and licensing, we need two teachers to open a classroom,” Williams said, “but new teachers are hard to find.” This is Williams’ 15th year teaching for Tri-County Head Start and this is the first time her classroom remained closed when the school year began due to a staffing shortage.

For families, the shortage of preschool teachers and support workers poses serious challenges for balancing work, family, and a household budget.

Cody Hayes’ 4-year-old daughter Karmin watched her older sister start second grade last month but waited more than six weeks until Ms. Williams could open her preschool classroom.

“She was definitely bummed that she couldn’t start school at the same time as her sister,” said Hayes. The last few weeks have been challenging for dad too, parenting a busy 4-year-old by day and working third shift at Lovejoy Manufacturing by night.

“I need to sleep at some point,” Hayes said.

Tri-County Head Start serves more than 900 children and families in Cass, Van Buren and Berrien Counties and according to CEO Chanda Hillman, Head Start agencies nationwide are struggling with staffing shortages in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and its economic upheaval.

“The majority of our classrooms are now open and we are opening more rooms as we hire and train more staff,” Hillman said. But early childhood educators and support staff are hard to find.

According to data compiled by the Michigan League for Public Policy, Van Buren County and Berrien County have “low capacity” with only one childcare slot available for every two kids. Cass County is

considered a “child-care desert” with more than 4 kids for every available childcare slot. [Child Care: A Critical Need in Michigan – MLPP](#)

“Head Start serves families who often have no other options for safe, affordable childcare and preschool,” Hillman said. “Closures hit low-income families and families of color the hardest.”

But opening more Head Start classrooms requires more money. A lot more money.

Head Start is a federally funded program of the Department of Health and Human Services and according to the National Head Start Association, Congress needs to appropriate an additional \$2.5 billion each year to boost stagnant wages and attract more educators into the work force. In its 2022 report *Confronting Head Start’s Workforce Crisis*, NHSA found a nationwide average of 30-percent vacant staff positions. [2022.05 - Workforce Brief \(nhsa.org\)](#)

“Universal pre-K is an attainable dream in southwest Michigan,” Hillman said, “but we must improve quality of life for our teachers and support staff if we hope to serve every child in need.”

According to NHSA, new Head Start funding bills are currently stalled in Congress.

“There is so much promise and opportunity in this year’s appropriations bills,” said NHSA Executive Director Yasmina Vinci. “We hope Congress and the Administration will do everything in their power to finalize this critical funding legislation as soon as possible.” [NHSA Response to FY22 Continuing Resolution - NHSA](#)

[Michigan's Collective Early Childhood Action Plan](#), released in August, identifies compensation as a major hurdle for hiring the people necessary to rebuild the state’s childcare industry. According to the plan, the median wage for childcare workers in Michigan is \$11.13 per hour, and “early childhood educators with a bachelor’s degree are paid 22% less than their K-12 counterparts.”

“Early childhood educators are real-life heroes in our community, promoting healthy child development and supporting families when they need it most,” Hillman said. “We provide training and support for our employees. If you want to have an impact in our community, please join us.”

Tri-County Head Start currently has 27 open positions posted on its website, mostly Associate Teacher positions, requiring a high school diploma or equivalent. Potential applicants can review full job descriptions at www.tricountyhs.org.

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PHOTO CAPTIONS

2022-10-17 TCHS SH1 Julie

Preschool Teacher Julie Williams opened her Head Start classroom October 17 more than six weeks after the school year began, waiting to hire and train an associate teacher.

2022-10-17 TCHS SH1 Cody

Cody Hayes' balanced childcare with a third-shift manufacturing job as his family waited for Ms. Williams' classroom to open.

2022-10-17 TCHS SH1 Kid1

2022-10-17 TCHS SH1 Kid2

2022-10-17 TCHS SH1 Kid3

New students arrived for their first day of preschool on October 17.

2022-10-17 TCHS SH1 Bus

Teacher Julie Williams and her teaching partner greet children arriving on the bus for their first day of preschool.