Early Childhood Education Reporting Project

by Marie French and Natalie Cheng

December 10, 2013

Executive Summary

The initial ambitious scope of our early childhood education reporting project quickly became more realistic. First, we whittled it down to five central questions to base our stories around. Then, halfway through the semester, three compelling packages based around the most reachable of those questions were selected: child care subsidies, Title I preschools in Columbia, and one family’s experience with early childhood special education resources. While all the extensive sourcing, research, reporting and gathering of multimedia are now complete, only one story was published as of Dec. 10, 2013. The initial challenges with sourcing, structural problems with one draft and time constraints with video production pushed back our vision for achieving publication of all three stories during the semester. The material gathered during the course of reporting offers potential for future stories in this realm and the problems with coordinating quality multimedia gathering and text storytelling techniques offer lessons for future convergence capstone reporting projects.
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Summary of Project

The project that started off with five main central questions eventually evolved into a set of three unrelated stories. The first focused solely on the Columbia Public Schools' Title I preschool program. Originally, this would’ve included both Title I and Head Start, another public program, but lack of responsiveness from sources at Head Start drove the focus to Title I. The second story zoomed in to tell the story of one family’s experience with the web of resources available to young children with special needs. Instead of trying to encompass the whole of early childhood special education, a three part video series for the web is planned to tell the personal story of Shannyn Yalaoui and her son Taysir. The last story, which we allowed to be determined by which sources got back to us more quickly, took on a life of its own. The plan for a story looking at the private market for child care was open-ended at the beginning but quickly focused in on the state child care assistance program for low income families. That story, with its more focused angle, ended up being the first story moved to publication. It was published on the Columbia Missourian’s website on Tuesday, Dec. 10, and is scheduled to run in print on Wednesday, Dec. 11. The current versions of these stories are included here. Stills from the gathered material for the Yalaoui’s story are also included.

Drafts, production timelines and current status

- first, incomplete draft of Title I story - Oct. 18 (no meeting on draft)
- second draft of Title I story - Oct. 29 (met on Nov. 1 with Liz to discuss)
- shot list for ECSE story – Oct. 31
- Storyboards for ECSE story – Nov. 4
- third draft of Title I story - Nov. 11 (met on Nov. 22 with Liz to discuss)
- fourth draft of Title I story - Nov. 25 (met Dec. 6 and began ACs)
- first draft of subsidy story - Dec. 3 (met Dec. 6 and began ACs)
- first script of ECSE story – Dec. 3
- Subsidy story published - Dec. 10 online and Dec. 11 in print
- Title I scheduled for publication on Dec. 19 (tentative)
- Rough cut of ECSE story – Dec. 10 (met with Derek Poore to discuss)
- Projected publication of ECSE story – Jan. 10 (work with Derek Poore to perfect)

![Image](image.jpg)

**Picture 2:** Labels around the classroom in a Title I preschool room at Field School help students learn vocabulary and independence skills like cleaning up after themselves. Almost everything in the classroom is labeled with visuals or words to encourage learning.

**Evolving Plans and Future Reporting**

Early childhood education is a high-interest topic that offers great opportunities for innovative storytelling. The number of stories originally pitched to our editors, Elizabeth Brixey and Judd Slivka, was not reduced because of any problem with the concept. Instead, time constraints prevented achieving the full scope of the original project. There are still many stories to be told in this area that were simply not possible to fully report and produce with the allotted time and manpower. During the course of reporting, several additional potential stories at both a local and statewide level in the area of early childhood care and education emerged.

The difficulty of finding human sources to center our stories around during the first few weeks of the reporting process quickly forced us to reign in the width, breadth and depth of our production plans. The first five pitches in the initial plan for the project is included below, as submitted to Brixey, city editor at the Missourian and an associate professor, and Slivka, convergence journalism assistant professor. We agree with the consensus of our mentors – that every single one of these pitches could have been a capstone project on its own, so we decided to go with three capstone projects rather than five.
This series on early childhood education in Columbia and Boone County will illuminate the changing landscape of resources available to families with young children. Paced over the semester, the reporters will produce multimedia packages for publication in the Missourian on topics related to early childhood care and education.

Topics will include resources available to families, changing funding and availability, the experience of immigrant families and parents caring for young children with disabilities. The importance and impacts of the style and quality of early childhood programs will also be explored.

Central Issue: Public funding for early childhood education

**Top Five Pitches**

*Question:* Who are the families whose children qualify for publicly funded preschool programs (Title I and Head Start)? What effect does this have for children and their families in the program?

*Summary:* Columbia Public Schools receives federal funding for Title I preschool, which is targeted to high-risk children with developmental or learning delays. The space in these programs is limited (only 650 according to CPS website) and demand consistently outstrips available supply. Central Missouri Community Action oversees several mid-Missouri Head Start programs but again, there are limited spaces. The quality of these programs varies and research indicates that the quality matters for outcomes.

*Format:* An article focusing on the narrative of a few families who currently participate as well as former attendees. We would present the photos for this piece in a slideshow (possibly with audio) including one to three images of each family/child. We could use one portrait per family and one to two images of the family or children participating in their education. Ideally, the visuals in this piece would be strong enough to juxtapose against those in the piece about families and children who do not have access to publicly funded ECE. Possible information graphics include a chart of available spaces in public programs, amount of funding, funding per pupil.

*Sourcing:*

- Families with children currently attending programs
- Families with children who attended in the past, currently enrolled in school
- Families who applied for spots in one or both programs but didn’t get one (this may result in an offshoot focused on non-public alternatives and the high costs of formal programs)
- Columbia Public Schools officials
- CPS teachers of both the preschool programs and early grades (on how effective, what differences they see)
- Head Start program teachers, administrators
- Missouri Head Start association (moheadstart.org)
- Analysts and researchers who try to determine effectiveness of Head Start and Title I preschools

*Question:* How do families with young children who don’t qualify for public programs handle finding early childhood care or education? Who are the people who don’t have access to formal programs and what do they do instead?
Summary: Statewide, only 2.6 percent of children are enrolled in public preschool. With the limited number of spaces in Head Start and Title I preschools in the Columbia area, there are still many private, paid tuition early childhood programs. Some local organizations have also tried to step up and fill the gap. What’s the economic impact of those programs? How expensive are they for families? What about families who cannot afford them? What low-cost alternatives are available that they use, such as a family member caring for the child or other informal arrangements?

Format: An article with an audio slideshow focusing on one family’s situation. The slideshow would include one portrait of each family featured and one to two images of the family or children in action exercising whichever ECE option the family has chosen. Again, ideally, the images for this story would be strong enough to contrast against the images in the story about families who do qualify for public ECE. Possible information graphics – percentage in Missouri in public ECE over time (NIEER report).

Sourcing:
- Families with children enrolled in private programs
- Families who made alternate arrangements because of the high cost of programs
- Columbia advocates/programs for ECE: Jack Jensen, First Chance for Children; Central Missouri Community Action; Columbia Cares for Kids; Rollins Reading/GrantMontessori
- Kathy Thornburg, data collected on Columbia early childhood prices (?)

Question: What alternative forms of early childhood education do immigrant, non-English speaking families have? How do immigrant and/or non-English speaking children fare in public programs?

Summary: According to the U.S. Census Bureau, immigrants accounted for 8.3 percent of Columbia’s population between 2007 and 2011. This is higher than the percentage in Boone County, 6.1 percent, and more than double the percentage in Missouri, 3.8 percent. Linda Espinosa, professor emeritus of early childhood education at MU and co-principal investigator for the Center for Early Care and Education Research -- Dual Language Learners at the University of North Carolina, spoke at a Migration Policy Institute conference about the variation of early childhood experience and school readiness in immigrant children based on their communities of origin. Some examples she gave: children of Indian descent are least likely to attend childhood care across age groups, dual language learners tend to use relative care more than English-only families, and DLL mothers are more likely to use relative care than childcare centers. Espinosa researches participation patterns in children of immigrant families.

In Columbia, there are several programs for cultural education, i.e. Xiao Lao Hu pre-school, Columbia Chinese Language School, Step Up Mizzou, Amiguitos.

Format: A micro-documentary-style video piece that covers immigrant families from various communities (China, Rwanda, Central or South America etc) and the choices they make for their children in early childhood education. The piece would include interviews with parents, children and teachers, and follow each child through a journey they take in their education. If the audio quality is good enough and we have enough material, we would like to try to stay away from narration.

Sourcing:
- Families with their children in cultural learning programs (or families considering putting children in cultural learning programs)
- Immigrant families using relative care or nannies for at-home learning
- Non-immigrant families with children in cultural/language learning programs
- Immigrant families with children in traditional day care centers
- Children from immigrant families who are now in school
- Linda Espinosa (studies dual language learners and early childhood education)
- Program administrators and teachers for Columbia Chinese Language School, Step Up Mizzou, Xiao Lao Hu pre-school, Amiguitos and other cultural/language programs

**Question:** How much does the format, style or quality of an early childhood program matter? What role does policy/standards and funding play? What are the current standards and what does a typical classroom look like?

**Summary:** Parents have many options for early childhood education. They can choose daycare centers, home daycares, to hire a nanny or tutor, to homeschool, to supplement traditional schooling with programs like Kumon. Even within daycare centers, there are different kinds of educational philosophies to choose from. For example, Montessori schools focus on independence and freedom, and La Petite Academies focus on language, cognitive, socio-emotional, physical, creativity and character building. Because of these various forms of ECE, there are different levels of requirements for accreditation as well. This story would look at the standards and policies each format must meet for accreditation, as well as the researched results of each.

**Format:** Text piece with photos and potential information graphic comparing the forms of ECE. Because this story would be a fairly explanatory by nature, one photo per educational method would likely suffice for the tone and purpose of the piece.

**Sourcing:**
- Administrators and teachers at different types of daycares/preschools (Montessori, La Petite, Columbia Public Schools, Kumon)
- People who work with children as nannies or tutors
- People who run home daycares
- Families who choose daycare centers
- Families who choose home daycares
- Families who choose at home, one-on-one education
- Parents who supplement preschool or daycare experiences at home or with programs like Kumon
- Researchers on ECE formats and methods and their long term effectiveness

**Question:** What resources are available for families with young children who have special needs and how has funding changed relative to basic ECE?

**Summary:** Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s First Steps (Missouri’s early intervention program) shows 4,999 infants and toddlers ages zero to three received early intervention services in the 2012 to 2013 school year. This number has grown steadily over the past ten years: 2,942 infants and toddlers in the same age group received early intervention services in the 2002 to 2003 school year. This story would look at how early childhood special education has changed. More specifically, this piece would look at how funding, policy and support for early childhood special education have changed in comparison with changes in other public education. This
piece could also look at early childhood special education methods and philosophies, like teaching sign language to children with autism to help with communication skills.  

_Format:_ This could be a video or audio slideshow with an infographic that shows a comparison of changes in special education with other areas of public education. The piece would include (hopefully) old photos or footage of early childhood special education in the past. It would also include sound bites from administrators, teachers and families. Because the story will be told on a slightly more macro-level than some of the previous stories, this piece might be a little less narrative and focused on central characters than some of our other multimedia pieces, and might include some voiceover to explain some of the ECSE logistics and history.

_Sourcing:_
- Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, First Steps
- Amy Wilson, Columbia Public Schools early childhood special education coordinator
- Researchers who study early childhood special education methods
- Families who use public early childhood special education services
- Families who choose alternative routes for early childhood special education

**Other Story Ideas**

**Question:** How has new research on early childhood education influenced interest in and funding for public preschool programs?

...  

**Question:** How does a lack of resources in rural areas outside Columbia and Boone County in mid-Missouri impact families with young children?

...

**Question:** Who are the future educators for early childhood programs? Is there a deficit in the number needed and number learning? What are they being taught? Who are the current educators?

...

In addition to those questions, which we were unable to fully explore with our reporting project, several stories in this area remain untold. For example, we requested and received all of the substantiated complaints against Boone County child care providers in the last year. A story could easily be built around those records. There are good profile stories to be told about some of the sources we spoke with. The issues of child care providers receiving subsidy could be more fully explored – we didn’t even touch on the topic of fraud in the program. From the reporting on the early childhood special education story, questions arose about the process the school district uses to evaluate the children who get into early childhood special education and the potential gap once they “graduate” from that public program. While Taysir’s mother was extremely focused on getting him the resources and assistance available to him, not every family is as able or committed to pursuing such opportunities. A story exploring the contrast between families who pursue and receive the resources available from early childhood special education to families with children who have those needs but aren’t getting the services would be extremely compelling. That’s only the beginning of the storytelling and reporting opportunities within the sphere of early childhood education.
Challenges: Reporting, Coordination and Production

One big challenge in this project was coordinating with the publication outlet to ensure material produced met standards of quality and stylistic preferences. This challenge was, for the most part, successfully met. But lessons from working closely and consistently with photo and graphics editors could be utilized to improve the experience of future reporting project teams. Primarily, consistent communication and weekly meetings with primary editors resulted in the most benefits. Getting additional team members on board early in the process, particularly for infographics, also smoothed the path to publication.

The wideness of the topic, initially, hindered focusing in quickly on one story or thread. The way we handled this was to break it down into some central questions – but these were still fairly broad. Approaching mid-semester, we had very few solid, “real” characters for the story, so we scrambled to focus in further. As a result, we decided to focus completely on Title I preschools for the public component, then on just one family’s experience with early childhood special education. The third story we left up in the air as we waited for sources, but it quickly became clear that the biggest story with the private child care providers lay in the state subsidy program. The lesson here was to be flexible with the focus of stories as the timeline progresses but also to get started as early as possible and do initial sourcing to lead to “real” families right away.

The lack of initial focus meant we cast an extremely wide net while gathering sources and multimedia. This proved to be a problem because, despite gathering video, audio and many photos for the Title I story, the end product included only five photos with the text piece. Because the Title I story went through many revisions and the focus of the story changed, the extensive multimedia gathered from one family became fairly irrelevant to the story. While they were still included, they were no longer a big part of the story. We should have either not invested as much time up-front with families unless we were sure of using at least some of the material or worked more closely earlier on with Emma Kessinger, our Missourian photo editor. By meeting early on with our infographics wizard, Elizabeth Scheltens, who has done reporting on early childhood before, we got her buy in and she was able to create some great infographics for our stories with information we provided.

We worked with a lot of really great editors throughout the process, and while each was helpful in their own way, it became a little difficult to know just how much to
communicate to whom and when. We worked with Joy Mayer initially to help with sourcing, Emma for photos, Derek for video and, of course, Judd and Liz throughout the project. In working with three different editors for multimedia alone, we would sometimes get mixed messages on how to proceed, and we didn’t always know how much each editor wanted to be kept in the loop. Perhaps for a future group, we would recommend working with a multimedia editor from the outlet the project would be published in, just to further streamline the process.

Another challenge was taking on a multimedia project of this magnitude. With 20+ hours worth of footage for the ECSE story alone, staying organized was a challenge. Not having had much experience in in-depth multimedia features, we would highly recommend organizing and labeling files early on. With the volume of data in video and images, we would also recommend backing everything up, multiple times if possible. Over the course of the semester, we have experienced everything from crashed external hard drives to crashed computers to wiped final videos.

Research and Sourcing

For this project, we interviewed 30 sources altogether. Several of those had multiple interviews or hour-plus conversations. For the family featured in the ECSE story, Natalie met with or shadowed Shannyn and Taysir seven different times, often for three or more hours. We visited with Mary Rook, director of the Title I preschool program in Columbia, three different times and visited classrooms at Field twice – once to get a feel for the environment and meet parents dropping off children, then to observe two specific classrooms with children featured in the story. The subsidy story involved several long interviews with child care providers but was also heavily driven by data and documents found on the state Department of Social Services site (see story) and requested from the DSS spokesperson.

A great deal of information about current research on early childhood education’s benefits and effects was gathered for the story, but ended up being cut because of length from the Title I preschool story. That information is included here and also contains data about the local program provided by Rook.

Columbia Public Schools has used a research-based teaching curriculum since the Title I preschool program began.

The HighScope curriculum was the subject of one of the most well known studies of the long-term effects of early childhood education, the Perry Preschool Project. This study followed 123 children born into poverty through age 40. It found that the group of 3 and 4 year old children who were enrolled in a high-quality preschool program following the HighScope participatory-learning approach had better outcomes on a number of measures.

They were less likely to have been arrested and earned more. They completed higher levels of education and were more likely to own a home and a second car.

Two other long-term studies with small groups of children in high-quality, intensive early childhood education programs have also found long-term, lasting benefits for poor children. The
Carolina Abecedarian Project started interventions much earlier, in infancy, and found lasting effects on language, reading and math skills as well as educational attainment. The Chicago Child-Parent Center Study found similar positive outcomes from early childhood education programs.

Researchers in all of these studies acknowledge the challenge in expanding these programs to a broader scale.

The results of a national study by the Department of Health and Human Services on Head Start, whose mission is to prepare at-risk children for kindergarten, showed most beneficial testing effects “faded out” for the entire group by first grade, when they were compared to the control group of children who did not participate in the program. But some subgroups, including children most at risk, saw continued benefits when compared to their peers who were not involved in Head Start.

Rook said results showing a “fade out” do not necessarily mean a program is not effective.

“One of the things that we really hold onto here is we are not just preparing kids for kindergarten or third grade. We’re looking at preparing kids for life,” Rook said. “Our whole curriculum is about developing communication skills, decision-making skills, problem solving skills, thinking skills. That’s really what we’re after. Those are lifelong skills.”

She pointed out that the Perry study also showed a fade out on testing and some other measures, but still saw beneficial long-term effects. Rook said that children entering kindergarten who attended Title I scored just as well on some assessment measures as “non-Title” students. The same testing took place for the first time last fall, and she said while the testing had been done this year that data was not yet available.

Title I students scored lower on group beginning sound awareness and letter-sound knowledge. For sound awareness, 77 percent of former Title I students met the benchmark compared with 83 percent of students who were not in the Title I program. For letter-sound knowledge, 72 percent of Title I students met the benchmark versus 76 percent of non-Title students.

Testing of preschoolers with a PALS Pre-K assessment tool began two years ago. Those results show that students make big improvements between fall and spring assessments in name writing in letter recognition.

“We see great improvements,” Rook said. The differences between improvements for full-day and half-day students, she said, are harder to evaluate.

**Interviewed individuals by topic area**

*General or other - not used*

1. Jack Jensen, First Chance for Children executive director - Sept. 17
2. Carol Scott, Child Care Aware of Missouri CEO - Sept. 4
3. Joanne Nelson, Child Care Aware of Missouri director of central region - Sept. 16
4. Elley Freeman, director of Bright Start Academy child care center in Columbia - Sept. 18
5. Mernell King, early childhood programs director for Central Missouri Community Action - Sept. 16
6. Heidi Stallman, parent – Oct. 11
7. Sean Dobkins, parent – Oct. 11

**Title I preschool**
1. Chris Belcher, Columbia Public Schools Superintendent - Sept. 10
2. Mary Rook, program director for Title I preschools - Sept. 20, Oct. 17, Nov. 18
3. April Bass, parent of student who attended Title I preschool - Oct. 9, shadowed Oct. 15 (multimedia not used)
4. Ron and Constance Childs, parents - multiple home visits and shadowing for multimedia (ended up not using any of the multimedia gathered)
5. ReSa McDonald, parent - Oct. 21, plus visit to home for photos
7. Autumn and Clint Gwinner, parents - Oct. 17 (not used)
8. Judy Schoonover, Title I screener - Oct. 17 (not used)
9. Labea Butler, parent - Oct. 21
10. Jenny Shao, parent - Oct. 22 (not used)

**Subsidy**
1. Paul Prevo, owner of Tiger Tots Child Development Center - Oct. 14
2. Elizabeth Smith, director of Latter House Child Care Center - Oct. 18
3. Monica Miller, owner and director of Dusk to Dawn Child Care - Oct. 23
4. Melissa De Long, parent of Savannah Sixta, subsidy recipient - Nov. 5, Nov. 14, Dec. 8 - extensive interview and home visits
5. John Wright, Missouri House Representative, D-Rocheport - Nov. 13 (not used)
6. Myke Gemkow, director of Columbia Community Montessori - Nov. 25
7. Peter Mueser, professor of economics at the University of Missouri - Nov. 26

**Early Childhood Special Education - Shannyn and Taysir**
1. Amy Wilson, coordinator for CPS Early Childhood Special Education - Oct. 14 (not used)
2. Michelle Aylward, Boone County Family Resources - multiple, not used
3. Shannyn Yaloui, parent whose son receives ECSE from Columbia Public Schools - multiple, extensive interview and home visits
4. Heather Demand, Taysir’s teacher at UCP Heartland Child Development Center
5. Niki Clover, director of local branch of Missouri’s First Steps program - Oct. 7 (not used)
6. Christy Brookins, director of UCP Heartland Child Development Center (Taysir attends) - Oct. 7 (not used)

**Analytics**
Because publication of the capstone project was not complete at the time of this writing, there were no analytics related to the project available to present here. However, the Columbia Missourian does use Google Analytics and has several metrics to help understand traffic on a particular story and where the interest is coming from. Following the publication of each segment of this story, we would want to take a dive into the
analytics for about a week following its posting on the Missourian’s website. We’d pull the statistics on where traffic was coming from, whether it was search engines, Facebook, Twitter or other referral sources.

Besides page views and unique page views, the key traffic statistics would be the length of time spent on each story, the “bounce rate” or percentage who view only this story and then leave the site; the “entrances” on the page, which would show how many folks are entering the site at this story, and the exit rate, which shows the percentage who leave the site after viewing the page. Looking at these metrics overall and just for users in the Missourian’s market of Columbia, Mo., should help us to gauge the local interest in the topic of early childhood education. Comparing these statistics to those for other stories about education would provide a good baseline to better understand the information in context.

Acknowledgements and Thanks

None of this project would have even gotten off the ground if it were not for the amazing help of Elizabeth Brixey and Judd Slivka, who were there to hold our hands or kick us into gear, as needed. A special thanks to Elizabeth Scheltens, our infographics wizard, and Emma Kessinger, photo editor extraordinaire. We would also like to thank the Futures Lab Mac09 for eating part of our project and teaching us a lesson in perseverance.

Thanks also to Derek Poore, who is reviewing our video for the Missourian, and Joy Mayer for her advice on the “In The Works” story.

Current version of Title I preschool story

**Headline: Kids learn essential lessons in public preschool**

By Marie French

COLUMBIA — Qwaylin Butler, 5, quickly heads to an alphabet mat at the front of his classroom at Field School and claims his place on the letter "C." His classmates, all 3- to 5-year-olds, sit on the other letters bordering the square mat. Little legs crossed. Hands in laps.

It’s time for morning messages and a greeting song. The messages take the form of drawings on a whiteboard.

The last one is three stick figures connected by plus signs and followed by an equals sign and a question mark. Stick + stick + stick = ?

Teacher Janice Legarsky, known to the children as "Miss Janice," asks them what they think each figure represents. She only calls on those children who are sitting properly and raising their hands.

It’s a teaching moment. The question mark is not a symbol most have seen before, so Legarsky explains its use.

"When you ask, 'Will you help me?' you put a question mark at the end," she says.
Preparing the kids for kindergarten by making sure they are familiar with basic school skills is one goal at local Title I preschools. Legarsky teaches a full-day class at Columbia Public Schools' Field Building, which has most of the district’s preschool classrooms.

These types of interactions and adult support are key to the teaching philosophy at Title I preschools in Columbia, which follow the HighScope curriculum. The developmental psychology-based teaching philosophy encourages independence and uses adult-child interactions to facilitate learning.

The district-wide preschool program serves children from a range of backgrounds, with a screening that focuses on the child's development and, to some degree, risk factors in their family background. Title I is a federally funded program meant to serve at-risk children and children with various learning or developmental delays.

Not every child eligible for Title I preschool gets in. The waiting list is consistently more than 100 children, according to the program administrator. Those closest to starting school get priority, but there are only 630 spots compared to total kindergarten enrollment of almost 1,500 this year.

Parents with children in Title I say they’ve seen big improvements, which vary from child to child. They improve their vocabulary. They write better. They pick up after themselves. They express themselves more clearly. They get along better with others. In some way, they are learning skills that set them up for a brighter future.

The importance of this foundational, pre-kindergarten learning has led district Superintendent Chris Belcher to target early childhood education as a key way to close Columbia’s persistent academic achievement gap and ease poverty in the community.

"Kids who go through Title I come into kindergarten OK. The ones who don’t often have less vocabulary and less social and developmental skills," Belcher said. "There’s no intelligence difference, just a difference in environment."

About 60 percent of the families whose children are enrolled in Title I preschool qualify for free and reduced lunch, a measure of poverty.

Mary Rook, director of the Title I preschool program, said she strongly believes in the importance of early childhood education to prepare children for life. Every morning, she stands outside Field School. She greets many parents by name, high-fives the students and asks how they’re doing.
Picture 4: Paige’Sha Logan practices writing her name Monday, Nov. 18, 2013 at Field School. The penguin on her name tag is meant to help her learn the phonemics of the letter P. Each student in the classroom has a different animal that starts with the same letter.

**Full circle**

"You know that lady who stands out front every morning?" asks ReSa McDonald, 30. "She was my preschool teacher."

When Rook opened the first Title I preschool classroom in Columbia in 1986, McDonald was one of the first students. McDonald’s 4-year-old daughter, Paige’Sha Logan, started preschool at Field in early October.

"I really wanted her in all day, but they had an opening for a half day, so I took it because she can go all day next year," McDonald said.

The number of children currently enrolled in Title I preschool is 7 percent fewer than the 675 children served four years ago. That decrease is because the district has moved toward offering more full-day classes.

"The quality is excellent whether you’re in a half-day or a full-day" class, Rook said. "What we were really trying to do is accommodate for those families who needed a full day of care. It’s not day care, but it lessens the transitions for kids."
Rook said that most of the 100 or families on the waiting list want full-day classes for their children.

McDonald is a single parent and also has an 8-month-old daughter, whom McDonald’s aunt watches.

McDonald said she hasn't seen any big improvements or changes yet in her older daughter's abilities. "She has started to sing more, mostly transition songs," McDonald said, referring to the little songs used to help children clean up or switch from one activity to another.

Paige'Sha also works with her uncle to continue learning after she comes home from school. He works with Paige'Sha on her letters using a tablet tracing game for about an hour almost every day.

But at school, Paige'Sha can learn essential social skills and how to collaborate with her peers.

**Conflict resolution**

Helping children interact and develop appropriate social skills is all part of the method used in the preschool classes. During Paige'Sha’s class, children were allowed to pick out a scarf to dance with for a special activity.

"Paige'Sha, you may pick out a scarf now," Title I preschool teacher Susan Berrey says, allowing the children seated on a circle carpet at the front of the classroom to get up one by one.

Paige'Sha walks to a basket in the middle of the carpet, grabbing the last scarf in her favorite color, pink.

"But I wanted a pink one," another girl protests.

Paige'Sha has laid her scarf out in front of her and is too busy noticing that her scarf is smaller than the others to hear her distraught classmate.
"Wait, I want a big one," she mumbles to herself.

The classmate grows more and more upset, and Berrey intervenes. "Well, maybe if you pick out a scarf, you can ask Paige'Sha nicely if she would like to trade," she says.

The girl picks out a large, light purple scarf. "Paige'Sha, can we trade?" she asks in a plaintive tone.

Paige'Sha nods and silently offers her scarf to the center of the circle. Both girls scoot back to their places, assess their scarves and smile.

Rook said these types of interactions help teach children how to express their needs and self-regulate emotions. Before these periods of play, children make plans for what they want to do, and afterwards, they evaluate what they actually did.

"The adult support that is being provided during that playtime — the teacher is modeling language, modeling interaction," Rook said.

All preschool teachers in Columbia Public Schools have four-year degrees in early childhood and a teaching certificate. Instructional aides, who work with the teacher in a team-teaching style, often have degrees in a related field, Rook said.
The experience and knowledge of the teachers, Rook said, leads to better quality.

**Transportation is biggest problem**

Paige'Sha was in day care for two years before starting preschool, McDonald said, which she thinks helped. McDonald works at a day care and said if Paige'Sha hadn’t been admitted into the preschool program, she would still be sending her daughter to day care, which was somewhat difficult to pay for.

"You got to have it so I can work," McDonald said. "I just hope they still have it when my baby is old enough."

McDonald said she usually has a break when her older daughter finishes the half-day at Field so she can pick her up.

"The only time it interrupts is in the morning because I have a class at the day care then," McDonald said. "They let me pick her up and drop her off. She’s got to go to school."

Her car recently broke down, so a close family friend who helps drop off and pick up Paige'Sha has been doing it even more than usual.

Some parents walk their children to Field. Or push them in strollers. Or catch a bus. Others, like McDonald, sometimes rely on friends or relatives for a helping hand.

Rook said one reason behind the growing demand for a full-day preschool program is the challenge of transportation. That’s the number one reason families have to drop out of the Title I preschool program, she said.

"Parents are doing everything they can to get their kids here," Rook said. "Even parents who maybe don’t have any income, maybe have no car, maybe are a single parent with multiple children to get to different schools. They are making really some extreme efforts to get their child here."

There used to be an informal arrangement in which children attending preschool could ride a bus to an elementary school with an older sibling if there was space, Rook said. Efforts to formalize that and improve safety by ensuring those children had car seats, which would take up several spaces, put an end to that arrangement.

"In my next life, when I’m queen of the world, there will be a special bus route just for preschool," Rook said.

While the school district is required to provide transportation for elementary school students, there’s no such requirement for the preschool-age children.

The focus of the Title I preschool program is on educating and preparing children. But if they can’t get to school, Rook said, there’s no way for that to happen. No amount of quality curriculum can work if the child has no way to get to the classroom.

**HighScope curriculum**
The Columbia Title I preschools use what’s called the HighScope curriculum. This system focuses not just on academic cognitive and language skills but incorporates life skills such as independence, decision-making and problem solving.

"It is classical, so it has not veered from what is developmentally appropriate, but it has kept pace with changing focus," Rook said. "That curriculum is adaptable to new research about brain development, new research about how children learn to read and write."

The HighScope curriculum was the method used in one of the most well-known studies of the long-term effects of early childhood education, the Perry Preschool Project. In that, it showed positive outcomes such as higher incomes, lower chances of being arrested, greater educational attainment, more likely to own a home, among others.

Rook said one misconception she sometimes encounters with parents is the difference between day care and preschool. In preschool, everything is intentional and moves toward the goals of teaching skills to children, Rook said.

"The preschool is a very structured, high quality, systematic program to provide children with additional foundational experiences," Rook said. "I think there is sometimes a misconception that they’re just babies and they’re just playing, and I think people overlook or are not fluent in what the value of play is."

During activities in the classroom, a teacher and instructional aide provide direct support for children to learn how to interact with each other. Instead of stepping in and solving a conflict themselves, the adult will ask questions to help the children express themselves and "play" with others.

‘A great parent and a terrible parent’

This interactive support was key for April Bass’ son, Everett, who now goes to kindergarten.

At the time, Bass and her husband, Jamey Bass, were both graduate students at MU. When Everett was younger, they arranged their schedules so someone would always be home with him.

The Basses planned to have three children, but a breast cancer diagnosis when Everett was 14 months old made that impossible. April Bass went into remission when her son was about 2. Around that time, she and her husband started to have concerns about his social interactions.

"He was only getting interaction with grad students," April Bass said. "That became a concern for us, but being grad students it was impossible to afford anything substantive."

When the Basses took Everett to community events or the park, he didn’t know quite how to interact with other children.

"We noticed that his ability to appropriately socialize was limited," April Bass said. "Instead of going up and saying, 'Hello, my name is Everett, do you want to play?’ he would just poke them."
After hearing about the Title I preschool from Jamey Bass’s co-worker, Everett went through the screening process. April Bass said it was strange because while he had no problems with most areas, he did have trouble socially.

"It made me feel like a great parent and a terrible parent at the same time," she said.

The improvement once Everett started a full-day program at Field was instant, she said. He began talking with friends he made at school, and his behavior changed for the better at parks and events.

"He had all of the social tools that he needed," April Bass said. "He doesn’t have any of the social inadequacies we were concerned about."

The experience helped prepare Everett for kindergarten, she said.

**Assisting the transition**

Constance Childs said the experience of attending the Title I preschool definitely benefited her older daughter, Cassidy.

"She’s really doing very well. She’s one of the leaders in the classroom," Childs said. "I did see a quality improvement with her learning, her writing, her speech, the kinds of words she was using, recognition of concepts like square, triangle."

Constance and her ex-husband, Ron Childs, have two daughters. Cassidy, 5, qualified for the Title I preschool program. But their younger daughter, 4-year-old Reagynn, did not. Reagynn attends Latter House Childcare Center, which is affiliated with Latter House Kingdom Ministries. Cassidy attended before going to preschool.

Constance said the transition from the Latter House day care to preschool was not difficult for Cassidy because she was used to the classroom setting and having a routine. Before Latter House, the two girls went to a home day care where the provider homeschooled her child. Children of different ages were in one big room, and there was less structure.

"It probably would have been harder to do that transition from the home day care," Constance said.

The expense of having two children in day care before Cassidy got into Title I was a burden, Constance said. The Childses said it cost about $1,000 each month for the girls to go to Latter House.

Both Ron and Constance said they were surprised Reagynn did not qualify for Title I preschool. They said they though it might be because she was more awake and talkative than her sister was during the screening.

“We didn’t take [Cassidy] there with the intent of her being half asleep, she was just tired. It just happened and she didn’t want to answer anything," Ron said.

But Rook said not answering questions could also mean help is needed.
“You may know everything on the test but if you can’t tell us, you need to come to preschool and learn how to do that,” Rook said. “That’s a skill as well.”

**Dreading kindergarten**

Labea Butler, 31, said her son, Qwaylin, has improved his skills while attending the Title I preschool program at Field.

He has done so well there that she is not looking forward to him starting kindergarten. She said the teacher and staff members have been wonderful in helping her son.

"He is 100 percent different," Butler said. "He did not like people at all, not even family members. He is much more open and friendly than before."

Back in Qwaylin’s classroom, Legarsky explains what a question mark is used for and then goes on to tell her students that it represents a choice for them: What reward will they want if they behave properly as a group?

"I love how Qwaylin raised his hand," Legarsky says to the children, who have erupted into chatter. Asked what the reward should be, Qwaylin smiles and speaks up. "A pancake party!"

Options are debated. Pancake party? Popsicle party? Pajama party? Eventually, Legarsky asks for a vote, and the class decides on a Popsicle party.

Legarsky said this exercise is part of the Positive Behavior Support method, which began at the preschool level and spread upward through kindergarten and elementary classrooms at Columbia Public Schools. It provides and incentive for good behavior.

Qwaylin has a speech therapist and has been tested for autism, but he doesn’t qualify as special needs for any programs, Butler said. On the one hand, he requires some additional attention, but he also has to be around other children. Butler said she’s had difficulty getting day care centers to understand his particular needs.

"I was about ready to quit my job to take care of him because the day care center was not working out because they didn’t understand his needs," Butler said. "I was blessed with the Title I program — he was in it last year and this year."

Despite the support and improvement for Qwaylin in Title I, Butler is concerned he might backslide in kindergarten.

"They’ll actually have to come work with me to get me to calm down about finding some place for him. He has improved so much I don’t want him to go backwards at all," Butler said. "He is being more social, getting over his fears of people and little things; they really let him do it when he’s ready. They don’t push him."

After the morning ritual of the greeting circle, it’s time for a large group activity. Emphasizing that she will hand out two pieces of wax paper only to "friends," which is what classmates and teachers call each other, who are sitting properly, Legarsky and the instructional aide begin to distribute the paper.
Large group provides an opportunity to practice large (or gross) motor skills. "Wax paper skates," Legarsky says. "They work best on the carpet, friends."

She demonstrates a shuffling slide on two pieces of wax paper.

Qwaylin is the first to venture off the carpets and onto the slick tile floor, sliding his feet quickly along and tracing a path around shelves with boxes of toys and art supplies.

The children catch on quickly and a controlled chaos ensues, with 15 preschoolers slip-sliding on the carpet and the tiled floor.

Reporter Natalie Cheng contributed to this article.

Supervising editor is Elizabeth Brixey.

Families, child care providers find subsidy program tough to access

By Marie French

COLUMBIA — Melissa De Long is no stranger to the intricacies of state assistance programs. She is a caseworker for a Columbia-based mental health nonprofit. When she was raising two children, De Long received a state child care subsidy to send them to day care while she worked. Now her daughter, Savannah Sixta, 19, gets the same subsidy for her son, Jeremiah.

The application process for switching Jeremiah's day care was so frustrating for Sixta that her mother, De Long, took over dealing with the state.

It took about six months and about $3,000 in child care payments for De Long, 39, to get approval for the switch from the state’s Family Support Division of the Department of Social Services.

“I pretty much drained my savings,” De Long said. “I had to use money I could’ve used for him even elsewhere.”

Child care providers in Columbia said difficulties with the application process to receive state assistance for child care make it difficult for parents to get the financial help they need to work or go to school. Parents can face long wait times for approval, lost paperwork and a time-consuming application process.

"The system just isn’t working. It’s broken for most of the families," said Paul Prevo, owner of Tiger Tots Child Development Center, which has two locations in Columbia. But, there are people at the Family Support Division who are helpful, he said.

"Who doesn’t want the parents to be able to take their kids to school, go to work, be a functioning member of society in every way that you can imagine? That should be everyone’s goal," Prevo said. "When it takes 30 or 45 days to get approval, that’s hindering that goal pretty harshly."

Missouri’s child care assistance program provides subsidies for parents who are working, attending school or job training programs, as well as for children with special needs or in protective services. More than 37,000 children received assistance through the program in August, the most recent data available, according to a monthly state report. About 82 percent of children receiving the assistance also received food stamps, Medicaid or both.
Sixta, who has an anxiety disorder, attends a job-training program and has applied for work at temp agencies. She said that’s one reason for the difficulty getting approval — information about the job-training program was incorrectly entered from her paperwork so the department thought she worked for the vocational rehabilitation service.

"I had to go back twice, and they still got it wrong," Sixta said. "They weren’t entering any accurate information."

Unless the parents or the child have a disability, or the child is in protective services, parents can receive the subsidy for care only when they are in classes or at work. The amount of subsidy, full or part time, is based on the class or work schedule verified by the state.

Employment is the biggest reason families are eligible to receive child care assistance, according to an annual monthly average calculated by the Missouri Department of Social Services from August 2012 to July 2013. About 63 percent were employed, and 15 percent listed education or training as the reason for eligibility.

The majority of families — 94 percent in August — were single parent households. More than half of the children receiving assistance were black. A third of two- and three-person households had an income at or below 42 percent of the federal poverty guidelines. For a family of three, with one parent and two children, that would be about $8,202 annually.

But parents who are working or in classes may find it difficult to get approval, Prevo and other providers said.

**Long process**

Applications for the state child care assistance program are supposed to be reviewed and approved or rejected within 15 days. About 43 percent of the monthly average of 5,914 applications last fiscal year were rejected, Department of Social Services spokesperson Rebecca Woelfel said in an email.

"The top four reasons for rejecting an application were incomplete applications, no need for care, verification not provided by client and excessive income," Woelfel said.

Applicants must provide documentation of their work or class schedule, verify their income with pay stubs, provide documentation for any deductions such as health care costs and complete an over-the-phone interview that the division schedules by mail.

If the parent misses that phone call — or doesn’t get it at all — the process starts all over, said Myke Gemkow, director of Columbia Community Montessori.

"If you’re talking about working parents, parents in school or any parent besides those sitting next to a phone all day, it’s difficult to make the system work," Gemkow said. "It’s not that the steps are individually difficult, but comprehensively there are just so many, so repetitive, so prohibitive that I think it leaves a lot of people open to being left out or left off."

In one month, parents at Tiger Tots applying for the subsidies didn’t receive at least 20 scheduled phone calls, Prevo said. That’s contributed to an increase in backdating of approvals for parents who were incorrectly denied.

"Boone County is having a severe issue right now with providing timely coverage for families," Prevo said. He said this makes it difficult for parents who find work to get approved quickly enough to be able to pay for child care.

"You have to cover that gap yourself or turn down the job," Prevo said. "We’ve probably had three parents who turned down jobs in the past because they couldn’t get the assistance in a timely manner. It’s really quite sad."
Between January and August, about 38 percent of pending applications took longer than the 15-day time frame to get approval, compared with 27 percent in the same period last year.

Elizabeth Smith is the director of Latter House Childcare Center, a church-affiliated child care center that receives subsidy payments for about 80 percent of the children. She said there have been several instances of lost paperwork where families have had to start over on the application process.

Smith said she gives parents packets with the application material.

"The process is not a hard process, but it’s a long process if they don’t get all the paperwork in at the right time,” Smith said.

**Lack of communication**

Another challenge for child care providers is getting notified when a parent has been approved to receive the subsidy, Smith said.

A reorganization meant to streamline processing of applications for different assistance programs means mid-Missouri child care providers and parents waiting for approval have to call in to a hotline in Jefferson City. Prevo said parents and providers often are put on hold when they call this number.

Prevo said he thinks some of these critical functions could be automated and done online. Although child care providers can input attendance information and request payment by automatic electronic deposit, there is a lag time with child care providers finding out when a child has been approved.

"Generally, to find out in a timely manner, we have to call the 1-800 number,” Prevo said. "It's a very outdated system.”

Monica Miller, owner and operator of Dusk to Dawn and Days Too Child Care Center, used to work for the Department of Social Services as a caseworker. She said a transition away from traditional caseworkers and a decrease in in-person service have hurt families. She said she tells parents that if they go to the county office, they need to have reception log them in to officially record their visit, even if they're just dropping off paperwork.

"It’s just a hassle for the little bit that they actually give,” Miller said.

She no longer accepts children if the parent expects subsidy assistance but does not already have approval from the state because she once lost $4,000 when some parents were rejected and she wasn’t notified quickly enough.

De Long, 39, said it seemed to her that the process had worsened since she went through it for Sixta.

"It’s more difficult to access. The process is just very slow,” she said. "You can’t even go up to the office and request to see a caseworker.”

The main way they communicated with the division was by mail, De Long said. She said she finally got some action when she sent a complaint letter to the Boone County supervisor and the department’s director. A few weeks later, a caseworker called her and helped sort out the incorrectly entered information, which led to the approval.

Even with the subsidy, child care for Jeremiah is still a big expense, De Long said. The state subsidies don’t always cover the full cost of child care, and parents receiving subsidies have to pay the difference.
Prevo said even at the lowest state-required co-pay rate of $1 per year, he still charges families $60 per week. Some parents are surprised that it costs that much — or anything — and end up deciding not to enroll, despite having gone through the subsidy approval process.

"A lot of times they determine that they really can’t afford it after all, which really sucks because if it was explained properly the first time, it would save them a lot of time and trouble and save the state a lot of time and trouble," Prevo said.

Gemkow said the low reimbursement rate makes it more difficult for child care providers to operate quality programs with highly trained and well-paid staff, which would have many benefits.

"It is not a reliable source of revenue for any sort of business model that is meant to educate children," he said. "If it’s just a place to leave kids while parents are working, fine."

**Among lowest in nation**

The low reimbursement rate is compounded by Missouri’s low income-eligibility limits. Families are [eligible for the state child care subsidy program](#) if they fall at or below 123 percent of the federal poverty line or about $23,520 for a family of three, according to the [National Women’s Law Center](#).

That’s about $452 per week.

Federal funds will account for almost 80 percent of the $167 million spent on child care assistance and quality improvement programs in Missouri in fiscal year 2014, according to a plan submitted to the federal government by the [Department of Social Services](#).

A [rule proposed in May by the Department of Health and Human Services](#) would require more information about the quality of programs, stricter background checks and more training for providers receiving the subsidy. The comment period on the rule closed in August and is in the final stages of review.

The rule also would require a period of transitional assistance for temporarily unemployed parents. Missouri currently includes 30 days of job search or seasonal unemployment in the eligibility criteria.

Only four other states have equal or lower limits for child care assistance eligibility.

A change to the state child care assistance program in 2012 was meant to ease the problem of the "poverty trap" for low-income working parents. It created a partial, tiered subsidy so parents getting a raise could keep some of the state assistance.

This transitional benefit allows only families who already get the subsidy, not new applicants, to receive half of the subsidy when making under 151 percent of the federal poverty level. Then they can get a quarter of the amount when making up to 175 percent of the poverty level, or about $34,000 annually for a family of three.

But child care providers still said the program penalizes families for making more money and deters some from taking raises or promotions.

Prevo said one woman who was right on the edge and receiving the subsidy got a 12-cent-an-hour raise and lost food stamps and some of the child care subsidy, which ended up costing her $1.50 an hour.

"It’s pretty sad when there is a system in place that punishes you for working hard and doing your best," Prevo said.
De Long said she’s felt that way for a long time from her experience raising Sixta and trying to get ahead now by getting her master’s degree at night.

"Any time that you make any step toward getting ahead, they want to take it back," she said. "In some ways, it seems like it’s intended to hold people back."

Smith said the low subsidy amount and difficult situation faced by some families means Latter House charges fees on a sliding scale based on an evaluation of the families' income and situation. She said affordable child care is out of reach for many families, even those who don’t qualify for a subsidy.

"I think subsidies need to be raised and the poverty level needs to be raised," Smith said. "The more you make, the more they take away. ... If the family's income rises, some other benefit the family receives goes away, so that keeps them at the same level."

**Struggle to balance costs, quality**

Dusk to Dawn charges about $125 per week for a preschool-age child, which is one of the lowest prices in Columbia and Boone County, according to data provided by Child Care Aware of Missouri. Even at that price, Miller said, she has trouble filling as many spots at the day care as she would like.

"How much really can I charge them when they're only making $800 a month?" Miller said. "It's hard to run a business when you know what families are or aren't surviving with. I've been the single mom with three kids."

In May, Dusk to Dawn received more than $24,000 from the state subsidy program, the third largest amount of any provider in Boone County.

Miller said she wishes she could have all her staff get their Child Development Associate certification. Her teachers do not have college degrees, and she does not purchase a set curriculum, which she said allows them more flexibility with their lesson plans.

"Once they get that credential, I'm not going to be able to pay them enough for that," Miller said. "You're not going to find a college graduate willing to work for minimum wage."

Gemkow said he thinks there is support for focusing more of the subsidy program on quality educational programs. He and Prevo both cited research that estimates a public return on investment in early childhood education between $7 and $12 for every dollar put in.

**Multiple studies**, including the HighScope Perry Preschool Study, say the return on investment comes from the fact that people who received early childhood education tend to be more successful. They earn more and pay more in taxes. They are less likely to commit crimes, which means lower law enforcement costs. And they are less likely to need welfare assistance, further reducing government costs.

"That subsidy rarely covers anything other than bare bones day care," Gemkow said.

"I think enough people have agreed that (early childhood education) is an important enough investment that more resource allocation or more appropriate allocation of current resources, I believe, would be supported by the majority of taxpayers," Gemkow said. "Redefine the purpose of the child care subsidy to be not just day care but high quality preschool."

Prevo said Tiger Tots focuses on education as its primary goal, but most of the revenue comes from parents who are able to pay the full price of tuition.

De Long said Jeremiah switched from Dusk to Dawn to Tiger Tots because of the greater focus on education, which she said both she and Sixta think is important for him to be ready for kindergarten.
Prevo said he thinks there are enough local legislators and community support that change is possible. His background in politics has made him a potential leader of a group of local child care providers to push for improvements in the system. As of now, such efforts are in the initial stages, he said.

"It’s an issue of just doing what’s in the best interest of the kids that are the most at risk and that seems to be what everybody wants to do, and we’re just trying to help nudge them along," Prevo said. "We’re just a mix of about a 100 plus or minus private providers of child care in the Boone County, Columbia area that are completely unrelated to each other, and it’d be nice to get a common voice together to have a common approach."

For now, De Long and Sixta are just glad to have fixed the problem with the subsidy for Jeremiah’s day care costs. De Long said she doubts the system will change anytime soon but said there are certainly enough people complaining about it now to get some attention.

"It was very frustrating," Sixta said, "and no one should have to go through it."

*Reporter Natalie Cheng contributed to this article.*

*Supervising editor is Elizabeth Brixey.*