

St. Paul's Bennettsville hosts National Pilot Program for Freedom Schools

Bennettsville, SC, 7/27/09: The Family Literacy Center at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Bennettsville, South Carolina was chosen earlier this Summer as the site of the nation's Pilot Program for the first Pre-K Freedom Schools® initiative. Working together with Title I through the Marlboro County School District, Communities of Shalom, and Trinity United Methodist Church in Clio, the program has served 50 children of 3-5 years of age in the wider Bennettsville community. The summer program was designed to follow the core features of the *CDF Freedom Schools Program*, with additional components specifically for Pre-K children and their families.



The Rev. James Barnhill's hat was a big hit with Katlyn Terry (center), brother Caleb (left), and Jakayla Turner during a break from listening to A Fly Went By during class at the Pre-K Freedom School National Pilot Program.

The Program was housed at the Kindergarten Building in St. Paul's Episcopal Church campus in Bennettsville this summer.

The *Pre-K Freedom Schools* National Pilot Program has been housed at the Family Literacy Center (FLC) on the St. Paul's, Bennettsville campus. FLC operates during the school year to provide day-care for 25 of the community's young children while, at the same time supporting the parents of the program's toddlers as these adults seek to complete their high school education. As a requirement, all parents of any child enrolled in the program must either be in high school or attend the Adult Education Center from 8:00-11:30 a.m., where they work on their G.E.D. or high school diploma in order to improve their lives. While the parents are studying, their children receive a nutritional breakfast and snack, participate in morning singing and learning activities, interact with the story of the day, play in the learning centers, and enjoy outdoor

time on the playground under the supervision of the Center's staff and volunteers from St. Paul's Episcopal Church.

The *Pre-K Freedom Schools* National Pilot Program – which was organized to utilize the FLC facilities at St. Paul's during the Summer months – aims to provide high quality, developmentally appropriate enrichment activities in a supportive and nurturing environment, by engaging parents as partners in their children's education. Like the established *CDF Freedom Schools Programs* model which serves children from their kindergarten years all the way through high school, the Pre-K Pilot Program in Bennettsville was designed to instill in the participants and their families a love of reading. The initiative seeks to “connect the head with the heart thereby making a difference in self, family, community, country, and the world.”

The area around Bennettsville represents a perfect place for the National Pilot Program. Marlboro County is characterized as rural and is ravished with poverty, low educational attainment, and chronic unemployment. According to the most recent census data, the county's population is 44.5% white, 50.7% African American, and 4.8% Native American or other minority. Approximately 1550 of the county's population (over 5%) are children ages 0-3. There are no other Summer programs in the area for children of this age, and the average cost of child-care is \$75 per week, well beyond the means of most resident families.

Other telling characteristics regarding the challenges of early childhood education in the area served by St. Paul's, Bennettsville are the following:

- 18.0% of children in Marlboro County compared to 13.2% state-wide are born to teen mothers.
- 35.8% of children in Marlboro County compared to 23.7% state-wide are born to mothers who never finished High School.
- 29.4% of children live in homes below the poverty level. The infant mortality rate in Marlboro County is 1.3%. Low birth-weight babies are 14.3%, and babies born with less than adequate prenatal care are 35.3%.
- 23.2% of children in Marlboro County are failing the 1st, 2nd or 3rd grade.
- 28.1% of 19-24 year-olds in the County do not complete high school. ¹

Each week, the children in the Pilot Program worked through a major life theme. They took home a book at the end of every week based on that week's life theme. There were also weekly field

¹ These figures, based on 2005 data are taken from *South Carolina Kids Count* and the *Marlboro County First Steps 2008 School Readiness Risk Profile*.

trips to locations to reinforce the weekly theme, and there was one afternoon and evening per week dedicated to parenting workshops involving the parents of all participants enrolled in the Pilot Program. To further support the development of the family unit, parents received the opportunity to sign up for classes such as photography, cake decorating, floral arrangement, and language development. Though these courses are offered through Northeastern Technical College, the classes were actually held in the local community where they are most assessable to the parents. All participating parents received certification in these courses upon completion.



The Rector loses his hat (and his heart) during a break in the colorful Pre-K Freedom School classroom during the National Pilot Program hosted at St. Paul's Bennettsville this Summer.

First organized by the Children's Defense Fund in 1995, the *Freedom Schools* program provides Summer and after-school enrichment through a model curriculum that supports children and families around five essential components: High quality academic enrichment; Parent and family involvement;

Social action and civic engagement; Intergenerational servant leadership development; and Nutrition, health and mental health. In partnership with faith institutions, schools, colleges and universities, and community based organizations, the *CDF Freedom Schools* Program boosts student motivation to read, generates more positive attitudes toward learning, and connects the needs of children and families to community resources.² Since its realization as a dream of Bennettsville native Marian Wright Edelman, over the last decade-and-a-half the Freedom Schools program has inspired over 70,000 children to read, and has succeeded in generating a more positive attitude towards learning by connecting the needs of children and families to the resources of their communities.³

The *Pre-K Freedom Schools* National Pilot Program Coordinator, Marian David is in no doubt as to the importance of this program for the wider community of Bennettsville. "The program provides positive enrichment for children with opportunities to tap into their creativity while learning" Ms. David said. "It also allows college students, who serve as servant leader interns an opportunity to give back in the community and support the younger children." Rev. Stephen Love, Pastor of Trinity United Methodist Church is in total agreement. Rev. Love supervised half of the children involved in the Program at the sister-site in near-by Clio, South Carolina."This program offers the kind of engagement with our young children that cultivates learning at the critical stages of development." Rev. Love believes that, "Freedom Schools is a great investment for the individual child, family, community, country and world that indeed makes a positive difference."

James Barnhill, Rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church is elated that Marlboro County was chosen as the site for the Pilot Program. "We are promised that when we finally stand before Our Lord, whatever we have done for the least of our brethren will be considered a service for The King himself (Mat. 25:40). What a blessing that we have the opportunity to perform exactly this act of love right here in our community!" For more information on the *Pre-Kindergarten Freedom Schools* National Pilot Program, please call Marian David at 843-479-4846, or visit the Family Literacy Center webpage at

<http://www.stpaulssc.org/flc.htm>.

###

² See <http://www.childrensdefense.org/helping-americas-children/cdf-freedom-schools-program/about/>.

³ See <http://www.childrensdefense.org/helping-americas-children/cdf-freedom-schools-program/>.