



SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2022.** Please include this submission form with the electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).

PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: _____ Chesterfield County _____

Program Title: _____ Providing an opportunity to the youngest in the community to become future scholars _____

Program Category: _____ Health and Human Services _____

CONTACT INFORMATION

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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: _____

Title: _____

Signature: _____  _____

The Chester Early Childhood Learning Academy (CECLA)
Providing an opportunity to the youngest in the community to become future scholars
(Health & Human Services)

Abstract:

The Chester Early Childhood Learning Academy (CECLA) is a pre-kindergarten site created within a retired elementary school building. Established to support families who meet certain household financial need levels or who have students with disabilities in need of assistance, it provides access and opportunities for their pre-k child to transition into a traditional K-5 elementary school setting upon program completion ready for academic rigor. This new format was developed to build efficiencies within the operational delivery of pre-K programs and facilities while helping foster a community outreach avenue that was in danger of being reduced due to enrollment capacity levels in existing elementary school buildings.

Within the first year of opening (8/21), this school is successfully serving approximately 350 pre-k students within a Title I setting where the majority are from households at or below the poverty level or where they are students with disabilities. The programming is unique as it is entirely focused on meeting the needs of pre-k students and has drawn upon community partnerships (like local dentists with student dental visits), mental wellness resources (with the County Mental Health Department) and other charitable partners who assist families to help their children get a great start in school.

Problem or need for the program:

The Chester Early Childhood Learning Academy (CECLA) arose during discussions about possible programming cuts due to space limitations in existing school sites. The collaborative effort that arose from the concern that pre-k programs might need to be reduced helped drive an eventual new pre-k school model to benefit the students who were eligible to attend and the families and community in which it serves. School division and County leadership joined together to not only salvage an

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opportunity but also to create a new service level targeted at supporting some of our neediest county residents, pre-school age children from households at or below the poverty line.

Evolving research continuously points toward earlier interventions for any at-risk populations within the community to help support later student academic success and graduation rates within schools as a rationale for growing pre-k programs. At the same time, the market conditions of limited physical space and program site access needed within an area where the community needs were the greatest led to the development of this specific program and the potential for its use as a future model.

Access to pre-k classes had a preliminary start within the school division's k-5 buildings. However, as schools were operating at or near capacity with enrollment numbers for the required k-5 students, the ability to provide the option for pre-k was severely limited. With space at a premium, certain pockets of the population were not able to be provided expanded access to these programs and, where buildings were at or above capacity, pre-k programs had to be curtailed to potentially yield their space to required k-5 students. Additionally, with a single class section in a building dedicated to pre-k, those who worked with the class often felt isolated from the rest of the school. Support staff were often caught up meeting a mission that was often more guided toward state testing and 5th Grade promotion requirements. Hence, time for these specialized services were often prioritized for older students versus the youngest, small population at a site.

In seeking solutions to both find space and serve neighborhood populations with the greatest needs, discussions were generated about a site that only served pre-k students that could both deliver on a

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promise for access to families while also developing a specific social development and academic service goal for the students who would attend this site.

The problem shifted from *no room at a school to support these pre-k students* over to the challenge of *can we create a new program structure for these at-risk students if we bring them to a single site within their nearby neighborhoods.*

Description of the program:

The Chester Early Childhood Learning Academy (CECLA), was opened at the start of the 2021-22 school year in August 2021. AS students entered the doors, it became the first Chesterfield County Public Schools' building entirely dedicated to supporting the needs of prekindergarten students and their families who lived in households predominantly at or below the poverty level.

As the first challenge was to secure an appropriate safe place for young children, the priority for a setting became focused on the model of a school building. As division staff considered plans, this was considered the most effective structure as it would include classroom dimensions consistent with student learning groups as well as other critical elements. These features that were most desired included everything from bus drop-off areas and outdoor secured play areas to indoor needs, like smaller size restroom facilities, a library area for larger learning gatherings and a gym/cafeteria to allow for movement on a regular basis on cold or rainy days.

At this time, an older elementary school had been left empty and was set to be retired with a new school having been rebuilt at a different location for that existing student population. The county staff

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worked diligently with the school division to look at the repurposing of the older facility as both agreed that the location of the old site could best serve an area of the community with financial challenges. Both shared the common vision that rather than reducing pre-k options for families in need, locally we needed to look at how we could extend opportunities and access for these families with pre-k age children.

The building was repurposed by completing renovations to make it operational as well as aesthetically pleasing for young children and their families. This was able to be done in a cost-efficient manner as some of the major updates that a k-5 setting would have required (for instance building in science-ready lab areas or other larger Grade 5 student amenities) were not needed for a pre-k only site. With a world population focused on building health safety protocols, intensive cleaning and air quality update steps were taken during this process. In addition, to make this site more attractive and inviting to a younger population (versus the Grade 5 students it once served) various cosmetic repairs were made to include the addition of a fish tank with little seahorses (the new pre-k site's mascot they selected) in the main entry area.

While repurposing a building for use was a major undertaking in and of itself, the actual programming created is what has set CECLA apart as a community service model for the county. Staff that work within the site are dedicated to supporting pre-k age students and their needs. They are equipped to remain focused on the specific target needs of this age population versus the overall larger programming in a traditional elementary school that needs to support older students. One of the previous program-site weaknesses was that support staff needed to divide its time based upon school level issues (testing, scheduling, activities, facility access, coverages, etc.) and the older students often drew the majority of

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the time and attention. With a single age group, and without older students, this obstacle was removed and staff remains attentive to pre-k unique needs.

An advantage of the new program is that the entire mission for staff can be designated around the target of school readiness. Staff are prepared to assist and cover for each other. Staff can work as a team to collaboratively develop and plan lessons and student activities and calendars with a common knowledge base and timeline.

While the mission within the program always centers around preparing a child for general school readiness, a major goal that has been incorporated into the program plan is to emphasize a push to bring students into kindergarten when they return to their larger attendance zone k-5 elementary school settings with a grasp on reading awareness. The entire program is able to wrap itself around this mission as a singular feature versus having to be distracted by multiple age-level learning objectives interrupting the program's daily work.

For families, this structure also provides an additional layer of support. Staff is better equipped to deliver feedback on student progress and growth or suggest learning interventions for students if they should stumble and all who work in the program speak the pre-k age schooling language.

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion:

The design of this program was built with an intentional plan to support equity, diversity and inclusion. Again, this goes back to the initial planning phases and why the geographic placement of this facility was

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so critical. It was always a given part of the purpose for the program site to be aligned so that when the school opened it was nearby to serve a community population with high financial needs.

To better illustrate the dedication to the principles of equity, diversity and inclusion one can review the programmatic requirements that are in place to support the instructional organizational features. As the majority of student family incomes fall below a certain threshold, this has led to CECLA being designated as a Title I school. Adjustments are also made with enrollment to support families whose child has a disability.

The requirements to meet instructional funding supports can be seen within three different programs which serve this school: Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI), Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE), and Head Start. Below can be seen the distribution by category for students served within this school program.

Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) (12 classrooms at CECLA)

- Between 100-200% of poverty guidelines, or between 200-350% with disability
- Homelessness
- Parents were school dropouts
- Local criteria for up to 15% of slots
- Must be 4 years old by September 30

Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) (14 classrooms at CECLA)

- Must be found eligible for special education services
- Must turn 3 years old by September 30 for school-based services

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Head Start (5 classrooms at CECLA)

- 100% or below poverty guidelines
- Homeless/TANF/SSI
- Up to 15% can be between 101-130% of poverty guidelines
- At least 10% (20 students) with disabilities
- Must be 4 by September 30

Costs:

Once the County made the decision to preserve the building, various departments assisted with critical parts of the process. This included County Departments such as the Fire Marshall and Building Inspections staff with their work with site inspections and permit reviews.

The overall facility cost for renovations to reopen this retired school facility came in at approximately six million dollars (versus the average \$42 million to open a new school). These funds were generated from transferred savings from Chesterfield County Public Schools' (CCPS) New School Construction efforts.

As a joint county and schools project, numerous groups collaborated to bring this project to fruition. This included the CCPS Facilities, Instructional staff and Security Teams who were essential in various phases of the planning, design and construction efforts.

In addition, the County Parks and Recreation Department has assisted with certain site improvements that included repairs with portions of the perimeter fencing and gravel surfacing.

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As noted in the previous sections, funding was also realized through Title I as well as with Head Start, VPI and ECSE to assist with instructional operational costs.

Results/Success:

From an efficiency standpoint, the re-purposing of the building, formerly used for Harrowgate Elementary School, freed up instructional space in 12 different elementary schools. These twelve sites previously had one or two classrooms each dedicated for prekindergarten. Spaces in the school were often placed wherever they could be fit in and staff was often isolated from the other instructional staff that operated in the k-5 classrooms. By moving the pre-k class sections from each site, this allowed for these schools to help meet enrollment growth demands for their existing k-5 populations by freeing up the classrooms in their buildings.

In addition, the opening of the Chester Early Childhood Learning Academy allowed not only for the shifting of existing student seats to this site but also provided the space to accommodate an additional four classrooms which added 72 more seats for students within a high need area part of the community.

The community gained with this new program action. This was done in place of potentially having to reduce pre-k opportunities for families which would have impacted regional school readiness levels and the lives of numerous children. Instead, 349 prekindergarten students have been served this year and are building skills and supports to assist them for entering kindergarten with major academic advantages which may have been obstacles without this program.

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From an instructional and program success perspective, one of the top data highlights was seen on initial growth assessments that were taken. In this early round of assessing success, roughly ten percent of the students (33 students) have already met the initial benchmark for Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS). As a result, they are now already engaged in enriching small groups with the reading specialist at Chester Early Childhood Learning Academy where, had this program not been developed and implemented, they would not have been provided access to the reading readiness opportunity CECLA provided.

From a community commitment standpoint, with a data point about parental involvement and buy-in, the school has received 94% of Title I parent compacts, showing that parents are strong partners with the Chester Early Childhood Learning Academy and the school's mission to work with them in preparing their child for future success in school.

The design of this program has encouraged further community connections and supports for students have been developed. Examples of these features include:

- > A partnership with local dentists to support student dental needs.
- > OT and PT service availability for eligible students.
- > A partnership with Chesterfield County Mental Health Services to provide counseling support and with serving on the CECLA student support team. In addition, they also are able to conduct student observations and provide teachers with various intervention strategies.
- > The Chesterfield Education Foundation has provided assistance through an MCD grant and a small award for teacher incentives in their work at CECLA.

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- > Both before and after school supports to assist families have been put in place.
- > Eye exams were instituted for all students and a partnership with Conexus instituted to provide eyeglasses for needy students.

Unique programming. Continued access for the youngest children of some of the community's neediest families. A solid foundation that helps build up the whole child to get them on a good start and assists in reducing obstacles in a child's pathway to success in school and eventually graduation.

Worthiness of an award:

The Chester Early Childhood Learning Academy (CECLA) has been able to deliver on a desperately needed service to the community in a manner that has addressed both student learning needs and access to these learning opportunities for an at-risk population. In its development it has successfully built upon community and county services and talents to produce future young scholars who have been provided a chance to overcome obstacles to learning that they may have been able to conquer if not for this program. This program both fills the gap in availability of resources and services for residents in the community while offering a new service for some of our neediest and youngest residents. The project that led to the opening of the Chester Early Childhood Learning Academy (CECLA) was an outstanding example of intergovernmental cooperation and coordination in addressing shared concerns and challenges by both developing a solution (building) and continuing to collaborate into the future with services for students and their families.

What we are most proud about is the smile that crosses one's face when an individual visits the location. Upon entering this site and experiencing the excitement of this unique program, one can quickly see

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how Chesterfield County now offers top-quality classes and programming that the youngest students will love. It is clear from the moment you enter that this school is designed to delight pre-kindergartners and encourage them to explore, grow and prepare for kindergarten. At the same time the program helps meet the needs of some of our neediest residents by making our families feel that this school is a safe and welcoming place where anyone would love to have their child begin their academic journey.

Supplemental materials:

- April 14, 2021 Presentation to School Board (ATTACHED)
- CECLA Pictures (ATTACHED)

April 2021 Presentation to the School Board:

[https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/chesterfield/Board.nsf/files/BZUNR2609F76/\\$file/PRESENTATION%20-%20Chester%20Early%20Childhood%20Learning%20Academy.pdf](https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/chesterfield/Board.nsf/files/BZUNR2609F76/$file/PRESENTATION%20-%20Chester%20Early%20Childhood%20Learning%20Academy.pdf)



CHESTER EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING ACADEMY

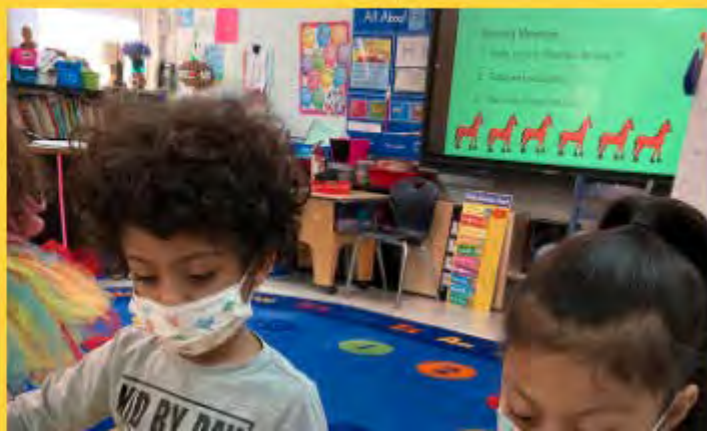
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