



Gabriella Palomo reads to the Head Start class at the Children's Museum of the East End in Bridgehampton on Monday.

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Giving Kids A Head Start

Children's Museum opens doors to program

BY ROHMA ABBAS

Strapped resources, coupled with a burgeoning need for early childhood education programs, prompted Children's Museum of the East End Executive Director Steve Long to offer up an opportunity for preschool-age children to get a head start on their education—by opening up space in the museum for a Long Island Head Start program for low-income families.

Mr. Long recently said that he was shocked when he learned that there were 60 families on the East End who were interested in a preschool geared toward low-income families. He said he wasn't surprised that there were families who wanted to get their kids into preschool, but that there were so many local low-income families in need of assistance.

"To me, that number astounded me, because to be eligible you have to be a family that's earning, like, less than \$20,000. And on the East End, that's unimaginable to me," Mr. Long said.

According to Mr. Long, those 60 families were placed on a waiting list in anticipation of receiving early childhood education services from Long Island Head Start, an organization funded by the federal Department of Health and Human Services. From those 60 families, 16 students were recently admitted to a new half-day Head Start program at the Children's Museum of the East End in Bridgehampton. The program started at CMEE in late September and will continue for at least the next year while utilizing the space rent-free. The museum is currently seeking ac-

creditation from the State Office of Children and Family Services to operate a full-day Head Start program.

While a Long Island Head Start school that services about 40 children already exists at the Bridgehampton Child Care and Recreational Center, the need has grown, according to Raquel Barnes, the former center director of that group. Earlier this week, she joined David Davis in teaching Head Start programs at CMEE.

The partnership between the museum and Head Start is unique, but one that makes sense, according to Mr. Long and Ms. Barnes. Mr. Long said CMEE's mission—to promote learning through play—is synonymous with Head Start's. And for Ms. Barnes and the students, a whole field trip is essentially at their fingertips right outside their classroom, she said.

The East End, she and Mr. Long both noted, is in need of more prekindergarten schools.

"He said a dream of his has always been to have a pre-K at the museum," Ms. Barnes said of Mr. Long. "And so that's how it started. And, of course, it's always been a dream for us."

Long Island Head Start, based in Patchogue, has seen its federal funding slip and remain flat over the years, according to Director of Operations Annette Harris, who oversees all of the county Head Start organizations, which educate 1,675 students in total. "We're just trying to do the best that we can to provide quality services for children and families, but it's very hard without additional funding while everything is going up and our

grant is staying the same," she said.

That's why it's an enormous help, and a "blessing," Ms. Harris said, that Head Start is able to operate rent-free for this year, courtesy of the museum. Without the donation of the space, it's unlikely that the group would have been able to operate.

Since most of the 16 students at the new Head Start group at CMEE are Hispanic, instructors, including Mr. Davis and Ms. Barnes, frequently switch between English and Spanish. Many of the students, who are ages 3 and 4, are just now learning English.

That's the case with Chris Rojas, a student who hails from Southampton. A curious child, Chris occasionally wandered off from the group of students who were seated in a circle on a carpet listening to Mr. Davis singing the alphabet on Monday. Earlier, Mr. Davis said that he asked Chris to count the number of rectangular-shaped toys lined up on a table but gave his young charge his choice of language.

"Espanol," Chris replied shyly, smiling slightly.

Mr. Davis and Ms. Barnes said they enjoy working with the kids and helping them reach those "aha" moments, when they begin to understand a topic.

"That's the beautiful part of it," Mr. Davis said. "Looking at their eyes light up."