

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Jane Boykin
Kate McMillin
601-355-4911

Over 30,000 Mississippi Four-Year-Old Children Enrolled in Preschool
Only 27,289 Eligible for Kindergarten This Fall

According to a KIDS COUNT Mississippi report released today in Jackson, over 75 percent (76.0%) of Mississippi's children four years of age are enrolled in a preschool program. Forty-four counties, 53.6 percent of the States 82 counties, have 75 percent or more of their age four population enrolled in a preschool program – 17 with enrollment at 90 percent or higher. Only six counties have fewer than 50 percent of their four-year-old population enrolled in a preschool program but none with fewer than 25.4 percent.

Only 27,724 of the 42,678 four-year-old children in the State are age-eligible to enroll in kindergarten when the new school year begins in the fall. Currently 32,087 are enrolled in a preschool program.

The federally funded Head Start programs operating in the State provide early childhood services to 15,353 children - just under 50 percent (47.8%) of the population of four-year-old children enrolled in a preschool program. These children represent nearly 36 percent (35.9%) of the State's total population in the group four years of age.

Although they currently account for almost seven percent (6.8%) of the total number of enrolled children, the fastest growing preschool programs in the State are the pre-kindergarten programs operated by local public school districts. During the five year period from 1999 to 2004, the number of four-year-old children enrolled in these programs increased 74 percent.

The preschool programs operated by non-public schools had a significantly larger increase of 98.3 percent even with three-year-old children included in the total number of enrolled children. Currently, available data on the State's non-public schools show over six percent (6.4%) of the total population of children four years of age.

The early care and education services provided by licensed child care centers serve an additional 11, 210 of the State's children four years of age. Enrollment data by age is not available for 1999; so, any change in enrollment over the five year period ending in 2004 can not be documented.

“That’s exactly why we rolled up our sleeves and started counting,” said Jane Boykin, Project Director of KIDS COUNT Mississippi and President of the Forum on Children & Families. “It seemed like one day we would have a couple of calls from child care providers around the State telling us about their decrease in enrollment,” she continued, “and then a couple of days later there would be an article in the paper that put a ‘no vacancy’ sign on child care centers and a welcome mat out for a State funded public preschool program.”

Data in the report document the State’s licensed child care centers are operating at 71 percent of maximum enrollment capacity defined by available physical space. Boykin said enrollment capacity considers both physical space and the age of the children who will occupy the space. “It’s too fluid to capture in data,” she continued, “and I suspect the actual unused capacity is somewhere around 20 percent statewide.”

When asked what needs to be done next, Boykin answered, “It’s time to ask the hard questions and time for those of us who think we know the answers – or some of them, at least - to give other people a chance to read the report, study the data, and come up with their own answers.”

KIDS COUNT Mississippi is a state project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s National KIDS COUNT Initiative. The Mississippi Forum on Children and Families is the State’s KIDS COUNT agency. A full copy of Count the Kids and the complete county-by-county data tables are available at www.mfcf.org/kidscount/countthekids.