

## Dinosaur School in Session

By Rob Manning

PORTLAND, OR 2005-07-18 (Oregon Considered) - Portlanders approved a tax levy to focus on children in 2002, and since then, more than \$16 million have been collected to help the area's kids. Tuesday the levy's allocation committee will vote on how to spend another chunk of what will total 35 million by 2008.

One of the programs up for renewal features a stuffed blue dinosaur, two plush turtles, and an obstinate jersey cow. Rob Manning paid them all a visit, and has this report.

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Officially, the program is called the "Early Childhood Consultation and Prevention Program." To the kids at nine sites around Portland, including St. Anthony's YMCA in Southeast, it's Dinosaur School.

Kids singing: "Dina wake up, Dina wake up, Dina wake up, wake up, wake up "

The three and four year-olds follow the lead of early childhood consultant, Cate Drinan, as she pulls a big blue dinosaur puppet out of her bag.

Dina: "Well, there's children here."

Cate: "Yes, there are Dina, they came to see you."

Dina: "Well I better come out "

Other teacher whispering: "yes, he's going to come out in a little while "

Dina: "Well good morning children, and welcome to Dinosaur School."

Dina, and her puppet buddies like Tiny Turtle and Bossy Cow have been a fixture at St. Anthony's since a year ago February. A typical lesson starts with a quick review of Dinosaur School's rules.

Cate: "Raise a quiet hand - raise a quiet hand, if you remember some of the rules for Dinosaur School. Katie - do you remember a Dinosaur School rule?"

Katie: "Don't hit."

Cate: "Don't hit - Katie says keep your hand to your own body', yes, very good."

The program's focus is to teach kids how to behave, so that they can enter kindergarten with the right kind of social habits. Certainly avoiding violence is part of that. And there does appear to be some cause for concern.

In a Yale University study published this spring, early childhood researcher Walter Gilliam found that pre-kindergartners are being expelled far more often than their older counterparts.

Walter Gilliam: "When we looked at the rate of expulsion and compared that to the expulsion rate for children in kindergarten through grade 12, we found that these youngest of students, these three and four year-olds, were expelled at three times - a little bit more than three times - the rate of K through 12 students."

But the Yale Study also offered a glimmer of hope - that when pre-school programs had consultants around--as St. Anthony's has with Cate Drinan--the expulsion rate is far lower.

Cate Drinan: "Having a behavioral consultant on site in pre-schools dramatically reduces - at least up to fifty percent - the rate of expulsions, so we know what we're doing is very effective, which is very satisfying for us."

The Dinosaur school - and its umbrella program called "The Incredible Years" offer more startling statistics: They claim to reduce conduct problems in nine out of ten children, and help seven in ten kids improve social skills and their behavior at home.

The Incredible Years also has parent classes, which don't involve puppets. Kelli McNeil took those while her son got lessons from Dina. McNeil says her son showed improvement right away.

Kelli McNeil: "From the first class - it wasn't that he walked out behaving, but he knew rules that were enforced in the school class by raising your hand and taking your turn. Because he gets really impatient waiting in line or waiting his turn."

But it's not like McNeil hadn't been trying to teach rules to her son Maxwell. McNeil could only guess that the puppets probably made the difference.

Back at St. Anthony's, consultants and teachers say there's no "probably" about it. The kids connect with the puppets - particularly a little turtle named Tiny. On this morning, Tiny is teaching the pre-schoolers to keep from losing their tempers.

Tiny: "I wanted to come because I learned something very special about how to use my words when I'm mad and I wanted to share it with you. Can I do that?"  
Kids: "Yes."

Tiny: "All those friendly faces - I feel really safe here with you. I'm going to teach you a secret that Tommy Turtle taught me a long time ago."

Consultant and puppeteer Drinan taught the kids to duck into their own imaginary turtle shells when their temperatures rose.

Following Dinosaur School, most of the pre-schoolers ran outside immediately, especially the boys, to get back on the playground. Some kids stayed inside - but of the half-dozen or so inside, only one girl could recall what she'd learned from Tiny, Dina, and Bossy Cow.

Girl: "You go in your shell, and you take three deep breaths, and you say I can do it, 'oh I don't know that part."

Pretty close. Teacher Tara Holmes says the kids pick up some non-verbal lessons right away.

Tara Holmes: "If there's a child who is bothering them, they learn to turn their back totally the opposite direction and turn their back to the other person that was bothering them and continue with what they were doing. They caught on to that one really fast ."

An early childhood expert at the University of Washington developed "The Incredible Years" curriculum. Locally, \$800,000 from the Children's levy helps the Morrison Center's consultants teach Dinosaur School, advise pre-school teachers, and lead parent classes.

Consultants say it's still too early to tell how much of an impact it's having, though the head of St. Anthony's says she's heard nothing but good things from parents and children.

The program is expected to get another \$1.3 million over the next three years. After that, puppet lessons will depend voters' renewing the Children's Investment Fund, which may appear on the ballot in November 2006.