

## Visit from Senator Luther Olsen



The following article by John Faucher appeared in the Waupaca County Post East on Jan. 13:

About 20 three-year old voices echoed down the hallway from a small lunch room Monday. Meanwhile, in a brightly decorated classroom state Sen. Luther Olsen visited with CAP Services staff and learned more about the Head Start program.

He asked questions and looked around as the tour continued to the lunch room where children were seated in tiny little chairs at a half dozen tables. There was a family style setting with an adult teacher's aide, or parent at each table.

The kids didn't seem distracted by the special visit as they drank from their little cartons of milk and kept busy passing food and eating their lunch.

Nicole Weier, Family Services Specialist for CAP explained, "Our lunches here are served family style to promote sharing, table manners and hands on activity."

Weier and her colleagues explained the services they offer families as they guided Senator Olsen through the informal tour.

Head Start is funded primarily through state and federal dollars with a mission to bring about a permanent increase in the ability of low income individuals and help them become economically and emotionally self-sufficient. It is a locally designed and implemented program delivered through CAP Services.

Head Start utilizes the family systems approach in providing early childhood education for children. Services extend well beyond the classroom to include year-round contact with families through home visits, referrals, goal setting, plan-

ning and community participation.

Senator Olsen interacted with the children. He asked "How old are you?" to one child. And another, how high they could count and what day of the week it was.

Responses varied in degrees of shyness and energy, as could be expected from a room full of three-year olds.

Weier explained Head Start's center based program nutrition education goals.

Children are served a nutritious breakfast, lunch and snack depending on the amount of time they are in the program each day. "We try to introduce them to new foods and healthy eating habits through ongoing food experiences," said Weier.

A registered dietician supervises the menus and provides educational information on healthy eating. Staff also works collaboratively with families and health professionals both in and out of the classroom to promote healthy practices early in life.

Professionals also make regular visits to the classroom to provide medical and dental screenings. They provide referrals and link families with ongoing sources for continuous care to address any identified



needs in the areas of health, psychological services and or other family necessities.

Last year nearly 90 percent of parents



surveyed said they felt more confident in locating resources within their community, and 84 percent said they felt more confident in their own parenting skills after involvement with the program.

Last year the program served 363 children in Waupaca, Portage, Waushara and Marquette counties. One-hundred percent of parents surveyed felt their child was learning at his or her potential.

Parental involvement is essential in the program and last year, families and community members volunteered 73,553 hours of in-kind volunteer service.

Parents are invited to attend school with their children regularly through planned activities and special days throughout the year. There are also family gatherings in the evening once a month.

On Monday, as the three-year old morning class finished their lunch, the next wave of four-year olds began to arrive at the site. Senator Olsen took the opportunity to talk with several parents as they dropped off and picked up children. A confident four-year old girl wearing a blue blouse with shiny sequins led her father down the hallway by hand toward Senator Olsen. She clung to her dad's leg as he shook hands with the Senator and introduced himself.

"This is our first year involved with the program," he told Senator Olsen.

"Have you noticed a difference since your daughter started the program?" asked Olsen. "Definitely!" he said. There was no delay in the father's response. "She

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loves school and looks forward to coming every day. She's learning things I didn't think she could do at this age."

Another father explained how his daughter was site reading, counting and measuring long before he ever imagined she would. In addition, he explained how the program has worked for them in other ways.

"We've really found the family goal setting, resources, home visits and parenting education helpful," he said. "Having our daughter come here has made us better parents, and it allows my wife time to study and work towards her GED."



Ninety-six percent of parents surveyed last year felt the Head Start family goal-setting process was helpful to them and their family.

Mary Naylor, assistant director of CAP Services Early Child Development programs, reiterated how Head Start staff assists family members to set goals and move toward economic and emotional self-sufficiency.

The father agreed. "This program has been a huge help for us," he explained. "It didn't take us long after our daughter was born to realize they don't come with an instruction manual. Honestly there was a lot we just didn't know," he said.

Senator Olson reassured him with a chuckle and said, "I know, I have children of my own."

As the four-year olds came in from the drop off area and into the entry way, they pinned on name tags and removed their snow gear with different degrees of agility. Parents and teachers helped the children neatly hang their coats, backpacks, and change into their shoes before forming a line to enter the classroom.

Once in the classroom, it didn't take long for one little girl long to ask, "Why are there so many big people here?" which drew a chuckle from those of us standing around the circle of children seated on the floor.

"That's a good question," replied Mrs. Pat, who is a certified 4-K instructor for Head Start. Next she unveiled the letter of the week, which incidentally was the letter S.



She used the natural cue to introduce Senator Olson to the students. After weekly helper duties were assigned and the daily schedule gone over, one student who was the "Star of the Week" had the floor with her mother to explain a special poster she

made about herself.

Before cleaning up and going to lunch, students were given a chance to shake hands with the Senator and have their group picture taken with him.

Some giggled and squealed with excitement as they shook his hand and scurried to the lunch line. Others were reserved and shy.

Senator Olson, who took a knee for the occasion, was all smiles as he shook their little hands. The children then exited to the lunch room. As he got up he said, "You know—we attend so many meetings, look at numbers and debate issues. But this is really what it's all about," explained Olson.

"I enjoyed this."

They spent some more time discussing how the new collaborative with school districts was working to provide community based 4-K services at their site. Currently Head Start partners with the New London and Stevens Point School Districts to help deliver 4-K curriculum. CAP's Early Child Development program also has agreements with other school districts and all Birth-to-Three agencies within their service area.

Senator Olson discussed the upcoming State budget challenges. He talked about the timeline and process involved in creating the next budget. "We will begin work on it soon, and our goal is to finish by June," he explained.

There is a public hearing process that must happen first, and of course he reiterated that this can be an unpleasant time for lawmakers since there are likely no additions to the budget and cuts will be inevitable.

Senator Olson reassured the Head Start staff that he values the importance of early education and childhood programs in our state. He was very thankful for the tour and visit.

Staff likewise thanked Senator Olson for his visit and provided him with an annual outcome report to take home with him.

