At Bronx School, Parents Laud Access to Full-Day Pre-K

By SONJA SHARP

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Among the tens of thousands teachers, parents and four-year-olds who started school Thursday under Mayor Bill de Blasio’s prekindergarten expansion, it is unlikely that many approached the classroom as confidently as four-year-old Abigail Eusebio.
“I have too many friends,” the brand new BronxWorks student boasted, her red patent leather Hello Kitty sandals gleaming in the overhead fluorescents as she played on the rug.

Most of those new friends hail from nearby Highbridge and Morris Heights, their families from as far away as West Africa, East Asia, Central America and the Caribbean. And like Abigail’s mother, Giselle Lopez, 33, most of their parents work full time, making the expansion of full-day pre-kindergarten from 20,000 to 50,000 a blessing.

The precocious youngster and the majority of her schoolmates will spend their weekdays this year in the center’s big, brightly painted classrooms from 8 a.m. until 5:30 p.m. BronxWorks added a second classroom of full-day pre-K this school year, serving 54 kids.

“I get off at 5 p.m.,” said mom Nicole Marquez, 23, who works maintenance at the school, where two of her four children, Hailey Marquez, 4, and Malimah Telfair, 3, are enrolled. “If I would have to pick her up at 3:15 … that would be very hard for me.”

Others, like Michele Cortese, 41, agreed. Although she’d overlooked the school in her initial applications for her four-year-old daughter, Claire, the flight instructor and mother of two said she was attracted by the style of teaching and planned to take advantage of the longer hours.

“It definitely helps, especially being a working mom,” she said.

Still others were so busy working they couldn’t make it at all. Fifteen-year-old Jasely Murillo said both of her parents were already at work by the time she dropped off younger brother Frandys Pena, 3.

If he weren’t at school, Frandys would be in daycare or “home with the TV,” she explained, adding that “even if he has only two hours, he learns something.”

Some worry longer days will be a strain on teachers. But veteran teacher Jasmine Bryan, 36, said that’s not necessarily the case. At BronxWorks, at least, more hours don’t necessarily mean more instruction.

“For full day, we have extra time for play, as well as an extra group activity,” she explained, adding that the overwhelming majority of her students would be part of the full-day program.

The universal pre-K initiative also helped longtime assistant teacher Farzaya Munna pursue full accreditation, she said. “I try to take all their pictures on the first day,” the crafty instructor explained as she flipped through photos of her students with their parents on her iPad, searching for a snapshot of her teary charge smiling alongside his father.

As for Abigail, she didn’t shed a tear.

“I’m a smart girl,” she said with a shrug.
Lead Teacher Jasmine Bryan with a student on the first day of pre-kindergarten at BronxWorks

Amir Johnson (center) waits with his parents outside for the first day of pre-kindergarten at BronxWorks.

Adrienne Grunwald for The Wall Street Journal
Shaquina Richardson and daughter Ma-Kayla Freeman on the first day of pre-kindergarten at BronxWorks. Adrienne Grunwald for The Wall Street Journal

Annette Rosa and Damian Nieto fill out a UPK (Universal Pre-Kindergarten) form on the first day of pre-kindergarten at BronxWorks. Adrienne Grunwald for The Wall Street Journal
Moyjae Aaron, Program Director, leads a song  Adrienne Grunwald for The Wall Street Journal

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