



Molly VanWoert/R-A

HERMITAGE — State Sen. Michele Brooks (R-50); Jim Micsky, executive direction of the United Way in Mercer County; Randy Seitz, CEO of Penn-Northwest Development Corporation; Greenville schools Superintendent Mark Ferrara; and state Rep. Mark Longietti (D-7) stand with students from the newly-expanded Tender Care Learning Center Pre-K Counts classroom as the cut the ribbon for its grand opening.

Local leaders plant another seed for Pre-K opportunities in Mercer County

By **MOLLY VANWOERT**
mvanwoert@recordargusnews.com

HERMITAGE — Of the 2,487 children in Mercer County ages 3 and 4, more than 1,600 of them live in families below 300 percent poverty, which can make it difficult for the

children to have access to pre-kindergarten learning opportunities.

In fact, 70 percent of the eligible children in the county are not currently enrolled in a high-quality Pre-K program, according to Jim Micsky, executive director of the United Way in Mercer County.

Friday, county and state officials gathered at the Tender Care Learning Center to discuss the importance of early education, and to celebrate the opening of a new Pre-K Counts expansion classroom that welcomed

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HERMITAGE — Students of the newly-expanded Pre-K Counts classroom at Tender Care Learning Center cut the ribbon at the classroom's grand opening Friday.

18 new students this week.

"We want to make sure that all children, starting with those most in need, have access to high quality education," said Bruce Clash, state director of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids.

Mark Ferrara, superintendent of Greenville schools and board chair of the United Way in Mercer County, attended Friday's roundtable discussion, comparing the Pre-K learning experience to a garden.

"When I was young, my father had a garden, and he would plant tomatoes and peppers, and he would water and fertilize them, but the process began with seeds," he said. "You can see with these young kids who are involved in Success by 6 and other early education programs, that by starting early, they are not just ahead academically, but also in terms of social skills."

Ferrara added that seeing what some of the parents in Mercer County go through to ensure that their children receive a high-quality early education "speaks volumes."

Monika Owens, director of Tender Care, gave an example of one mother who goes "above and beyond" to bring her son to the center every day.

"We have a mom from Sharon who doesn't have a car, and every day, she rides the bus to Walmart, and she walks her son over to us, and then at the end of the day, she rides the bus back to Walmart and walks over to pick him up," Owens said, tearing up. "She understands the importance of it, and it's an incredible breath of fresh air."

Of the 18 students welcomed into the new classroom, Owens said "most — if not all — of them have never had any expe-

rience in an educational environment."

"They are wide-eyed and so energetic when they come here, and it's almost like we can't rein them in, because there's so much to do and so much to learn and so much to explore," Owens said. "They just can't help themselves, and it is such a wonderful and rewarding thing to see."

Chief Deputy Ronnie Shilling said she's seen first-hand how early education can impact the life of a child.

"When I worked the streets, I would see kids who didn't have these opportunities, who came from broken families that lacked structure," Shilling said. "I can't tell you how many times I tucked a child into bed or read them a story after Mom or Dad was taken to jail.

"When you see early education give these kids a foundation and a base-ment to build off of, you can see the opportunities that they'll have available to them as they get older," she added. "It's important to let them know that life exists outside of Mercer County. There's a whole world out there."

While Micsky said he is thankful for the \$312,772 expansion grant received by the county that impacted 79 at-risk children in 2015-16, and that he is proud of the work being done by schools like Tender Care, he added that, "Unfortunately, there are still 1,100 Mercer County kids eligible for Pre-K Counts, but the funding is just not there.

"Our goal, over time, is to continue to apply for grants and continue to increase funding in budgets to come so we can continue to grow and expand these programs," he said. "There are still a lot more who need our help."