

AURORA SEEKS to ready kids for school

BORN LEARNING meets at 6 p.m. the first Tuesday of each month at the Aurora School. Families residing in the attendance area with children up to 5 years old can attend. Readiness programs info: 304-735-3781.

BY KATHY PLUM

The Dominion Post

AURORA — When Aurora teacher Krista Hayes heard Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin say in his State of the State address that all West Virginia children should read on grade level by third grade, she thought, "Yes, that's great and that's good, but how are we going to do it?"

It reaffirmed her belief that having children ready to begin school is one of the most important things in education.

At Aurora, the staff works hard toward that goal.

Aurora is one of three schools in West Virginia that receive a grant that will help parents prepare children for school.

But the Born Learning program isn't the only program at Aurora aimed at improving readiness.

Born Learning was developed in Kentucky and is financed in West Virginia by Toyota and the United Way, beginning last year. Aurora is the only school north of Charleston to receive funding so far.

The way it works is once a month, beginning in October, families with children up to 5 years old can come to school for dinner and a presentation on preparing children to succeed in school.

The Stemple Ridge Ladies cook the meal, and the Eglon Mountaineer 4-H Club cares for the children, while their parents learn from kindergarten teacher and program facilitator Debbie Mayfield. Door prizes are awarded at the end of the night.

"It's based on the premise that a child is born learning," said Mayfield.

Born Learning is funded for three years at \$12,000 per year. Thirteen families with 44 people attended the first session, in October.

"Because the community supports this school so much, we can stretch the money so far," said

highest potential.

What many people do not realize, Hayes said, is children have to know a lot before they enter school. For example, reading begins in kindergarten, so students must already be able to identify letters.

Aurora faces hurdles schools in more populated areas do not. In southern Preston County, the 150 students in pre-k through eighth grade are spread over a wide, rural geographic area. There are no daycare facilities or preschools unless parents cross the line to Maryland, and no public libraries.

Its location made Aurora

one of five schools in West Virginia to qualify for Education Program Allowance funding from the state legislature, sometimes called schools of isolation funds.

"Because they realize if you're going to offer equal opportunity you need more funding," Hayes said.

Aurora chose to use its \$100,000 isolation funding to hire an additional middle school teacher and to pay Hayes to devote half her time to readiness programs.

The resulting program is Parents as Powerful Partners. It meets at 10 a.m. Wednesdays and Fridays for 1- and 2-year-olds and Tuesdays and Thursdays for 3- and 4-year-olds.

This program is en-

tained with another, called Little Learners, that is funded by 21st Century Learning.

Parents and preschoolers can check out library books and other learning materials, and parents receive training. It can be simple things, like using what is at hand to teach a lesson. For example, at the grocery store, ask the child to find the red apple, or to count items.

"You'll see a smile on their faces, and we know something good is happening for kids in this school today," Hayes said.

Testing done on students now in school who participated in Parents as Powerful Partners shows they are better prepared than

past students, Hayes said. Preston County has also been funded \$80,000 per year for up to five years through the Campaign for Grade Level Literacy. Part of that is to expand Little Learners into every school and buy the Born Learning curriculum for more schools.

The campaign may also allow schools to soon start screening preschoolers for vision, speech and other problems, so they can receive help before they begin school.

Maureen Durst brought her 1- and 3-year-old daughters to Born Learning.

"We were really excited about this," she said. "It's like a confirmation that some of these things are good for them. It's just simple things that you learn."