



**OKLAHOMA IS RANKED NUMBER ONE
IN THE NATION FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD
EDUCATION. WE HAVE DR. RAMONA PAUL,
ASSISTANT STATE SUPERINTENDENT OF
SCHOOLS, TO THANK FOR THAT.**

BY RANDY KREHBIEL

OKLAHOMAN



TEACHER, TEACHER!

Dr. Ramona Paul of Edmond conceived of Oklahoma's early childhood education program in 1980. Today, in part because of the enthusiastic leadership of two state superintendents and equally supportive legislatures, it is considered the nation's model for educating our youngest students. Here, she is photographed with pre-K students at Clyde Howell Elementary School in Edmond.

JOHN JERNIGAN

OF THE YEAR

O KLAHOMA'S EARLY CHILDHOOD education program began on a Thursday.

"It's so clear in my mind," says Assistant State Superintendent of Public Instruction Ramona Paul almost thirty years later. "The state superintendent, Leslie Fisher, walked into my office and said, 'Ramona, what would you like to have for children under age five?'"

Fisher was no novice, as an educator or a politician. A Little Dixie Democrat who had been a teacher and administrator at places like Springer and Lone Grove before becoming superintendent at Moore, Fisher ascended to the state superintendency in 1970. Largely invisible to the general public, Fisher was regarded by many insiders as one of the savviest and most powerful figures in state government.

But he could not have known the ramifications of the question he asked that Thursday afternoon in 1980. No one could have. Not Leslie Fisher. Not the legislature. Not even Ramona Paul, the single person most responsible for making Oklahoma's early childhood education program the envy of the nation.

RAMONA PAUL WAS herself a product of early childhood education long before anybody called it that. Her parents were on the faculty of what was then Oklahoma A&M, and Paul spent her early years in the university's Child Development Laboratory school. Started in 1924, the lab was the first of its kind in Oklahoma and a precursor to modern early childhood education centers. Paul's mother, Girdie Ware, was

“GIVE THEM A ROOM FULL OF BLOCKS. EVERYBODY THINKS MATH IS A PIECE OF PAPER AND A PENCIL.”

—Ramona Paul, *Assistant State Superintendent of Public Instruction*

a teacher and researcher in the department whose influence on the field was such that the Early Childhood Association of Oklahoma's outstanding teacher award is named for her. Paul's father, H.G. Ware, worked for the university's agriculture extension branch.

"My mother used to say, 'If your daddy wasn't always giving money to these kids from the farms to go to college, we'd be rich,'" Paul says.

A marriage class, sometimes taught by the Wares as a team but more often by Girdie alone, became very popular with the young GIs and their wives who began coming to campus after World War II.

"Everybody took that marriage class," says Paul. "That vintage is just about gone, but every now and then, I'll run into somebody who was in it."

A scholarship in the Wares' name still is given by Oklahoma State University's College of Human Environmental Sciences.

Paul's twin sons, Steven and Stuart Emmons, also spent a lot of time with Girdie Ware, and Steven says his grandmother was

a major influence on Paul. More than anything, though, the times determined Paul's career path. She wanted to be a veterinarian, but in the 1950s, that sort of thing just wasn't done.

"When I was in junior high school, they said, 'What do you want for a career?' I said I wanted to be a veterinarian. I was told I couldn't do that.

"So, it was like, what do I like? Well, I liked young children. And so that's just kind of how I decided. In retrospect, as I look at it, my own experiences as a child in preschool were very positive. I liked children and I liked families, and so I could do that—because when you work with very young children, you have to work with families. You don't have any choice."

Paul was on the OSU faculty at age twenty-three. She was at Texas Woman's University in Denton in 1965 when the federal Head Start program began, and in the 1970s, she taught undergraduate courses and ran the lab school at Purdue, where she completed a PhD. After a brief stint as a middle school administrator with the Edmond Public Schools, she joined the Oklahoma Department of Education in 1977 as an early childhood specialist.

Which explains why Leslie Fisher came to her that day three years later.

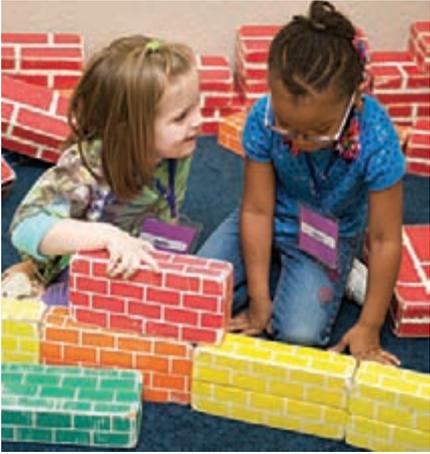
PAUL TOLD FISHER she wanted a four-year-old program "just like the five-year-old kindergarten program. All of those children could come to the public school—if they wanted to, on a voluntary basis—and they would have a certified teacher. And he said, 'You write the model, and we'll go to the legislature and get it funded.' That's what I did, and that's what he did."

"What's remarkable," says Steven Dow, executive director of the Community Action Project of Tulsa County and a leading pro-



PRIVATE GOES PUBLIC
American Fidelity Assurance Company in Oklahoma City, a community partner with Oklahoma City Public Schools, shares its corporate headquarters with Wilson Elementary's pre-K students. The company paid for Wilson's new classroom and playground.

ROMY OWENS



ponent of early childhood education, “is that when Ramona crafted the model, few people understood the genius of it. The wisdom of the standards she put in place, I don’t think any other state has achieved.”

Paul deviated from most existing models in several important ways. Her experiences with Head Start and similar programs convinced her that early education should include all children, not just those in poverty.

She also insisted on high standards. Head Start instructors in most states were required to have only a high school diploma, but Paul’s model called for college-educated teachers certified in early childhood education.

“The important thing that a certified teacher knows how to do is create an environment that is very free-flowing for children and helps them begin to make some decisions,” Paul says.

Finally, the model put the four-year-old programs under the purview of the public schools, a move that ultimately facilitated funding and oversight.

It was a small start. Only ten school districts took part the first year, and for the next decade, participating schools depended on state grants to fund their four-year-old programs. At about the same time, advances in brain research began validating what many early childhood educators had long believed: Children’s minds are shaped at a very young age.

“It was something we in early childhood education had known all along,” says Sally Nichols-Sharpe, president of the Oklahoma Early Childhood Association and director of teacher education at Bacone College in Muskogee. “Then in the nineties, there was a lot of research to back us up.”

Paul had left the ODE in 1988 for a job with Oklahoma City Public Schools but returned in 1991 when Sandy Garrett began the first of five terms as state superintendent. The two have worked together ever since, and Paul gives Garrett much of the credit for advancing the Oklahoma model of early childhood education nationwide.

In 1998, largely through the efforts of Representative Joe Eddins of Vinita and Senator Penny Williams of Tulsa, all voluntary pre-kindergarten funding was moved into the state aid formula. In essence, it officially made pre-K the starting point for public school education.

That same year, Paul agreed to let community-based organizations partner with schools



Ramona Paul at age two



With her husband, Homer Paul



Paul’s twin sons Steven and Stuart Emmons

to provide state-supported pre-K programs, as long as they met the State Department of Education’s quality standards. For example, a privately run day-care facility could work with a certified pre-K teacher on-site. Through this partnership, the state defused opposition from private operators fearful of losing their four-year-olds to school-based programs.

In 2003, Governor Brad Henry signed legislation making state-funded four-year-old programs available to virtually every child in the state. The governor and First Lady Kim Henry have remained visible supporters of early childhood education.

“Study after study has shown the benefits of early childhood education,” says the governor. “Children who participate typically perform better in school, display stronger reading skills, and have fewer disciplinary problems. Oklahoma has worked hard to tap the vast potential of making early childhood education available for all parents.”

At last report, all but eight of Oklahoma’s 535 school districts offer pre-K programs. More than 75 percent of the state’s four-



Paul’s Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority photo



Paul is second from left, back row.

year-olds—some 36,000—are voluntarily enrolled, as are 2,000 three-year-olds. The combination of Oklahoma’s participation level and quality standards are unmatched by any other state. In fact, based on number of students served and number of certified teachers, Oklahoma has ranked number one in the nation in early childhood programs for the past five years and is poised to do so for a sixth.

Many people and organizations have contributed to the development of Oklahoma’s early childhood education program, from rural school administrators to billionaire George Kaiser to legislators like Joe Eddins and Penny Williams. But through it all, from that day three decades ago until now, the single unifying force has been Ramona Paul.

“It is almost impossible to identify one single person who is responsible for the accolades Oklahoma’s early childhood education system has received,” says Steven Dow. “But if there was one person who could be identified, there is no question



Paul at an OETA interview in 1980



At Oklahoma A&M preschool



National Board-certified teachers, including pre-K teachers, receive a \$5,000 bonus each year.



Paul with her grandchildren and family members in Edmond



Paul, while on the faculty of Texas Woman's University, wrote 36 children's books called the Your World series.

Ramona would be that person. I can't overstate how extraordinary her contribution has been."

I T MAY SURPRISE some to learn that the godmother of Oklahoma early childhood education held her own twin sons out of school for a year between kindergarten and first grade. The boys' birthday was in August, making them young for their grade level. Although they had finished kindergarten in the Texas Woman's University lab school as five-year-olds, Paul concluded they were not ready for first grade.

"The parents said, 'You mean, your boys didn't pass kindergarten?' Yes, they passed kindergarten, but I think they just needed a little more time."

Paul originally intended to send the twins back to kindergarten, but the family moved from Denton to Birmingham, Alabama, in late fall. Birmingham had no public kindergartens, and the private ones were all full, so Paul kept the boys home. They began first grade just after their seventh birthdays.

"You know what? They sailed through school," says Paul. "I do not believe they would have if they had gone a year earlier."

"At the time," says Steven Emmons, "I didn't like it because we were older than everybody else. But I think it worked out very well. In fact, I tell people that I think that's a wise thing to do. I'm going to give her credit for that one."

Paul's youngest son, Jerry Emmons Jr., says he remembers his mother's influence as subtle but effective.

"I just know things seemed really easy," he says.

The twins, nine years older than their brother, spent a lot of time with Paul on college campuses, something both enjoyed.

"She always emphasized education," says Steven Emmons. "I never graduated college. I guess she was pretty bent out of shape about that, but she got over it when I graduated medical school."

Today, Dr. Steven Emmons is an Oklahoma City anesthesiologist. His twin brother Stuart is an Oklahoma City attorney, and

their younger brother Jerry is a major in the U.S. Army. Paul is married to Homer Paul and has four stepchildren, Lela Brown, Chip Paul, Jenna Paul, and Jamie Paul.

FOR PAUL, EARLY childhood education is not about what's called "drill and kill" or "skilling"—that is, using rote learning techniques to make three- and four-year-olds look good on standardized tests. It's about fostering inquisitiveness and developing the ability to interact with other people.

For the most part, she says, that's done, through carefully guided play.

"You want to learn math?" Paul says. "Give them a room full of blocks. Everybody thinks math is a piece of paper and a pencil. It is not. If you start to learn math with only paper and pencil, you're going to have difficulty. It's not going to come as easily."

"It's time for us to look at what we know and what the brain tells us, and let's do all these interactive things in science and math," she says. "When you handle it and feel it—when children are participating and observing—all of the sudden, they know the concept, but they didn't realize they were being taught."

At least as important, Paul maintains, is social interaction. It's one of the reasons she feels so strongly about putting as many children as possible in pre-K programs.

"The other part that is really very critical is the socialization, the learning to interact with children and cooperatively work together," Pauls says. "One of the biggest issues among adults is that employees can't get along with their employers. It ties back. If you don't learn socialization skills, you're going to have some difficulty."

In 2001, William Gormley, a professor at Georgetown University, began studying students in Tulsa's early childhood education program. His reports documented improvements among all ethnic and economic groups in a variety of measures, including letter-word identification, spelling, and applied problems.

Paul points to the 80 percent participation rate as proof of pre-K education's broad acceptance.

"We climbed a huge, huge mountain," she says, looking back on the last thirty years. "We have a long way to go to serve all children. But we've come so far, it's unbelievable to me. We've made such a change in Oklahoma." 