

## Pre-school program earns high mark

■ **Holiday celebration lauds effort of teachers**

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**T**HE pre-school students at A Plus Preparatory School on South Post Oak Boulevard are used to seeing Santa Claus in December. A holiday visit from the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston was less expected.

Larry Kaiser, UT-Health Science Center president, was on hand to hand out \$20 H-E-B gift cards to the day care's 111 families and 20 staff members, an act of generosity spurred by his wife Lindy Snider's visit to the center earlier this month.

School officials received a grant last year to participate in the Texas School Ready! Project, an effort begun in 2003 to close the gap that often exists between low-income and higher-income students when they arrive in kindergarten.

Classrooms that qualify for the Ready! project are those whose children and their families qualify for state assistance in some way.

Funded mainly by the state and administered by the Children's Learning Institute, part of the UT-Health Science Center, the program now serves 80,000 kids statewide, up from just 2,000 six years ago.

At A Plus, as Kaiser and Santa looked on, the 3- and 4-year-olds clapped the syllables in their names as they introduced themselves, then listed the first letter in their names. All went perfectly until Santa asked the students if they know where he lived.

"In the mall," one called out.

Geography of the North Pole aside, the children are progressing well, say their parents, UT staff and their teacher, Mary Ellen Holman. An educator in the Houston Independent School District for more than 40 years, Holman came out of



GEORGE WONG PHOTOS FOR THE CHRONICLE

**HOLIDAY CHAT:** Larry Kaiser, president of The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, talks with A Plus Preparatory pupils Terrell Wallace, left, as Sunshine Logg, right, listens at a holiday party at the school.

retirement two years ago to teach at A Plus.

She found the lack of discipline among the age group a hard transition, though she's settled now.

"I thought, with structure, they can learn," she said. "But they don't have to have any structure. They can learn walking, running." Even her great-grandson, also enrolled in the program, shows the same traits. Many of the children are plenty capable of reading, she said, and she plans to teach them all to do so.

Chase Jones, whose son of the same name is in the program, said he's been pleased with Chase Jr.'s progress.

"He was coming home telling us stuff we didn't know he knew," he said. "He's the one who told us to be here today."

Kaiser's wife Lindy Snider was similarly impressed

during her visit earlier this month.

"My son is able to grasp a pencil in his fist and make random circles, while these children have mastery of the complete alphabet," she said, referencing her own 4-year-old. "It was really a stunning sort of way to understand the tangible impact the program had." Moved by her visit, Snider wanted to do something to help the children and their families.

"I wanted to see them have really happy holidays," she said. "One of the ways to do that was to make sure they had a turkey or a wonderful meal as a family." The idea originated as turkeys-for-all, Kaiser said, but became gift cards at cost shared between the grocery chain and UT.

"The program is a phenomenal program," Kaiser said. "It's great to be here, and the kids are, obviously, really excited."



**STORY TIME:** A Plus Preparatory School students listen and participate in a discussion of a book read by Susan Landry, director of the Children's Learning Institute at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston.