

SCHOOL DAYS STARTING EARLY

ELISSA DOHERTY

KIDS are increasingly getting a taste of school life a year early in a bid to smooth the transition to prep, with kindergarten attendances as low as 50 per cent in some areas.

A growing number of Victorian state schools are running extended prep transition programs to give children a headstart, as researchers ram home the importance of early childhood education.

St Albans East Primary School will this year run classes for kinder-aged kids one hour a week from term 2, gradually building up to a full day by the end of the year.

Principal Anne-Maree Kliman said some preps who hadn't attended preschool didn't know basic skills, such as holding a pen or using a pair of scissors, opening sandwich wrapping, sitting still or listening to stories.

"All schools have transition programs, but we found there was a need for us to provide a more extensive pre-preparation school program," said principal Anne-Maree Kliman.

"We have a high number of migrant families with non-English speaking

backgrounds, so we also do Early English language acquisition. Fifty per cent don't attend kinder, which then detracts from the start of a school year, and the settling program can take quite a few weeks. We encourage them to attend kinder too."

Students do art, basic

literacy and numeracy, learn fine motor skills, socialise and sometimes join prep class.

The school began the First Steps program in term 3 last year, with 32 students taking part. She said there was a marked difference when they started prep this year, with children more engaged.

The state school transition programs are funded out of schools' own budgets and are different from kindergarten-style pre-prep programs run by many private schools at a cost to parents.

An OECD report recently highlighted the importance of early childhood education,

finding those who did not attend kinder or preschool were also more likely to flunk maths, English and science.

St Albans East was inspired by Bass Valley Primary in Gippsland, which designed a free pre-prep program six years ago.

Principal Leanne Edwards

won a Victorian Education Excellence award last year for the initiative, which has boosted vocabulary and literacy skills and taken the school's results above state average for the first time. "The difference is absolutely phenomenal, it's lifted results and kept them up," she said.

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Cousins Eddie and Mahana, both 4, love pre-prep at St Albans East Primary School. Picture: NICOLE CLEARY