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## **Staying connected – even 5,000 miles away**

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CHARLESTON — When Liz Wills wants to know what her 4-year-old daughter did in school today, she contacts Isabel's teacher at Morgan County HeadStart in Berkeley Springs — 5,000 miles away from her job in Iraq. Wills, a 37-year-old single mom, also is a master sergeant in the U.S. Air Force.

With the help of CreativeCurriculum.net, offered through the West Virginia Department of Education, Wills stays connected while serving her second tour in Iraq. The Creative Curriculum Web site allows teachers to build and store an electronic portfolio for each child. The portfolio includes observation notes and digital work samples, such as photographs and audio or video clips, significant improvements or problems that need to be dealt with right away.

"I was surprised when I saw how easily I could monitor her progress," Wills told The Journal in Martinsburg. "I saw a picture of her first day of school; it's awesome to see what she's doing and talk to her about it."

Sharon Hamilton, Isabel's teacher at HeadStart, said CreativeCurriculum.net is much more than e-mail. She is able to post photos of Isabel's artwork for Willis to view and can include Isabel singing a song or reading a story. The system also helps teachers and parents to connect online and schedule conferences. Teachers can even create lesson plans online.

"It is such a positive thing for parents in the military to have this kind of communication through their children's school," said Hamilton, who has worked in early childhood for nearly three decades. "Isabel is staying with her aunt while her mom is overseas. It's important not only for Isabel but for her mother to stay involved in her daughter's education."

CreativeCurriculum.net works in conjunction with Creative Curriculum, one of three approved curricular frameworks for West Virginia Universal Pre-K, and is now being used in nearly every county. Not only is Creative Curriculum aligned with state content standards and objectives as well as the West Virginia Early Learning Standards Framework, the Web component allows for much more frequent updates than the traditional parent-teacher conference does. Teachers and parents alike love it.

"That's a good thing," Hamilton said. "There are times, especially at holidays like this, that children like Isabel really miss their parents. Sometimes she just craves adult attention and that's when I will sit down and play with her."

Creative Curriculum is but one of the steps West Virginia has taken to improve early childhood education. The state has been recognized nationally for its push of universal preschool to be available to all 4-year-olds by the 2012-2013 school year. Half of the programs will be in collaborative settings with Head Start, child care and private programs. In addition, the state has been singled out for providing better access to preschool programs and dedicating more dollars to the effort than most other states in the country.

"Educational and political leaders across West Virginia have made early childhood education a priority," said

state Superintendent of Schools Steve Paine. "They know it's a good investment."

Research also shows that high quality preschool improves high school graduation and college attendance rates, employment and earnings and lessens future crime and delinquency. It also helps fight unhealthy behaviors like smoking and drug use.

"A child's brain develops more in the first five years of life than at any other time," Paine said. "Pre-k is a time for enormous knowledge acquisition that can set the tone for the rest of a child's education. It's that important."