**Phila. gets grant for kindergarten**

**Federal money expands program that brings pupils, families, and schools together.**

A $15 million, five-year federal grant will enable more than 4,000 Philadelphia kindergartners to participate in a program aimed at drawing parents and children closer together and binding families more tightly to schools.

The program, Families and Schools Together (FAST), already serves 30 city schools, funded by Philadelphia’s Department of Human Services. The new money from the U.S. Department of Education, announced at a City Hall news conference Tuesday, will expand FAST to 60 more schools.

FAST brings together families, teachers, and community representatives each week for two months to share a meal and participate in activities that include music, family games, and children’s sports.

Although the gatherings are simple, they are based on research showing that getting parents to spend even small amounts of time playing with their children can contribute to healthy development, said Lynn McDonald, a former family therapist who founded FAST.

Bringing people together also gives them a forum to make friends and talk about the challenges of parenting, she said.

“People find out they are not alone,” McDonald said. It also makes parents and caretakers feel more comfortable at their schools, leading to increased parental involvement in education.

In Philadelphia, Turning Points for Children, an organization that provides services and support to families and children, oversees FAST.

Turning Points will receive $6.5 million of the total grant and is required to provide $1.5 million, said Vicki Nolten-Mair, the group’s director of program development.

Monique Haynes, who attended the announcement of the grant at City Hall, participated in FAST six years ago with her son. Today, she works for FAST and says the program provides a way for parents to give their children one-onone attention.