

Can early education help close the achievement gap? ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

West Hartford -- Four-year-old Mercello Razuri had big plans to send his grandmother a letter. As he wrote the address and put play stamps on the envelope, his classmate at the University of Hartford Magnet School interrupted to ask what exactly he was up to.

"I'm writing the address so the mailman knows where to take it. See here," he said, pointing to the address, "That's where she lives." While there is no shortage of anecdotes about preschool playtime turning into a learning experience, there has been little proof that the \$220 million that Connecticut has been investing in preschool and daycare programs every year is producing results.

"It's astounding," Education Commissioner Stefan Pryor said of the state's failure to ever compare the achievement of students who attended preschool to those who did not.

"It appears there is a strong correlation," Pryor said.

But the truth, he acknowledged, is that he has no way of knowing if early education is working in Connecticut. This admission comes as legislators and education advocacy groups rally behind Gov. Dannel P. Malloy's plan to spend an additional \$4 million to expand the number of preschool seats in the state's poorest districts.

"That would be wise money to spend," Malloy told a roomful of parents and teachers this week at a West Hartford forum on his plans to reform education.

This discussion is occurring just as test results at a magnet school on the campus of the University of Hartford seem to show a correlation between attending a good preschool program and strong results on standardized math and reading tests.

Last school year, 6,400 students -- or 16 percent -- showed up in kindergarten classes having spent no time in a preschool. Half of them were from the state's 19 poorest districts, reports the State Department of Education.

Malloy's plan would offer 500 of these students a spot in a state-funded preschool.

"We have increased how many students are offered preschool, but we have not done the work to see if they are yielding results," said Cyd Oppenheimer, a senior policy fellow with Connecticut Voices for Children, a group that advocates for higher quality and universal access to preschool. "If you want to make wise investments you really need to know what's effective so you can replicate it." Changes on the way?

Four years ago the decision was made for the State Department of Education to begin tracking the progress of individual students. Each child was assigned a student number, as with Social Security numbers. This included the 9,000 4-year-olds in state-funded preschools.

Those 4-year-olds are now in third grade, and this week they are taking state standardized tests to measure how they're doing in math, reading and writing. State Board of Education members and lawmakers want to know if the results show a difference between students who received early education, and those who did not.

"If we are going to push forward, then my opinion is we really need to look at whether it's working," Charles A. Jaskiewicz, a state board member from Norwich, told the commissioner and board members during a meeting Wednesday.

However, the decision has not yet to be made whether the state will undertake such an analysis.

"These studies can be very time-consuming," said Barbara Beaudin, an associate commissioner of assessment and research. She noted the complexity of getting a reliable analysis of the state's four different types of early childhood programs.

Funding for such an analysis has not yet been committed, although Pryor said that is on his radar, and Malloy's plans for early education include a grading system for the state's preschool programs.

A glimmer of hope in West Hartford

Educators and lawmakers have struggled for decades on how to close the achievement gap between urban and suburban students. Educators at the University of Hartford Magnet School, which enrolls students from the suburbs and Hartford, think the full-day preschool they offer is the solution.

They point to their analysis of the third-grade tests students take.

Those urban students who attended the preschool, which is run by the Capitol Region Education Council, were slightly ahead of their

suburban classmates who did not attend, district officials report. Likewise, the results of standardized tests of the school's third-graders -- the first class to have been offered preschool at the magnet -- showed that the achievement gap between urban and suburban students had disappeared.

"These programs are really helping," said Principal Elaina Brachman.

For Nyah London, a third-grader from Hartford who attended the preschool, her attendance meant learning her ABCs a little bit sooner.

"We learned the ABCs. I didn't know the ABCs yet," she said. "It helped me be smarter."

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