

Preschool classes give children a leg up

POSITIVE RESULTS: 2nd graders who had prekindergarten test better

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RED BANK ô At first, the children in Sandra Davis' prekindergarten class look like they're having a good time, surrounding the teacher as she reads them a story and playfully calling out answers to her questions about the story.

Real learning is going on here, however. Proof of that is in results of standardized tests administered to second-graders who were in the district's first all-day prekindergarten class in 2004-05. They scored 95 percent proficient in language arts and 91 percent proficient in math this year.

"The test scores are definitely there," said Richard Cohen, Red Bank Primary School principal.

By comparison, students who were second-graders last year and didn't have prekindergarten scored 54 percent proficient in language arts and 70 percent proficient in math.

"When you compare the two, kids are getting a benefit from prekindergarten," said Laura C. Morana, Red Bank superintendent of schools. "Early childhood education is really paying off."

Red Bank is one of 27 districts in Monmouth County to offer some form of prekindergarten and one of eight school systems that offer it for a full day. Of those districts, four ô Asbury Park, Long Branch, Keansburg and Neptune ô are among the 31 that receive extra state aid and assistance under state court rulings.

In Ocean County, 14 districts offer prekindergarten, and seven hold full-day classes.

Overall, the educational community supports prekindergarten or preschool classes that have a strong academic component as a way to help students, especially those with economic disadvantages.

"We have strong beliefs in the value of preschool, whether it is all-day kindergarten or early childhood learning," said Frank Belluscio, New Jersey School Boards Association spokesman. "Research shows it's effective. It does help them academically later on." Working at grade level↑

At the very least, that positive effect is to ensure the student is performing and understanding material at their grade level.

"A child who is reading at a third-grade level in third grade will have a better change of academic success," Belluscio said. "If not, they need more assistance to succeed."

That finding has led the state Department of Education to consider implementing Early Childhood Education in districts with the most economically disadvantaged children, possibly starting in the 2009-10 school year. It eventually would be expanded to include all districts. Attendance would not be mandatory, but the program is not intended as government-funded day care, officials said.

"It's not day care. It is academically oriented," Belluscio said. "It gives children an academic grounding at the early years. It is proven to help them get a start early and achieve academically."

Preschoolers are introduced to concepts such as reading, writing and some math through play activities in different "centers" in the classroom, such as literary, art or playhouse centers.

Learning to graph

Activities can include graphing the number of rainy and sunny days in the month and counting off the days on a calendar. Children refer to a "sound map" to learn how to say words, which Davis did while reading the book "Pete's Pizza" to the class, by emphasizing the "p" sound to teach them how to pronounce the title.

"It helps them decode (words). They're not memorizing the alphabet, but beginning with actual sounds so they can apply the skills," Morana said.

When Davis asked the class what is found on the book's title page, the students replied with more sophisticated words, such as "illustrator" and "author," which they learn by modeling what their teacher does.

"They use the same vocabulary the teacher is using," Morana said. "We tell the teachers don't treat them like 2-year-olds, speak as you'd normally speak."

Morana and Cohen said they've seen progress in this year's prekindergarten class since September.

"This isn't where they were in September," Morana said. "They've matured so much."

The Red Bank prekindergarten classes have 106 children. Others are enrolled in private preschool programs, Morana said.

School officials have worked with private preschool providers, such as the Community YMCA, to ensure they are using the same Tools of the Mind curriculum as the borough schools. By doing this, students from other preschools will be on the same academic level when they come to the borough schools, Morana said.

Little pupils, big strides

Educators have seen other benefits from the prekindergarten classes that can't be measured, such as improvements in behavior, socialization, problem solving and creative thinking.

"We look for meaningful progress between prekindergarten and kindergarten," Cohen said.

Since prekindergarten students have been entering kindergarten, for instance, discipline problems have declined, he said.

Red Bank officials said they've seen prekindergarten pupils progress beyond their current grade level, which has prompted modification of curriculums to keep up with their progress.

"Because of the success (of current kindergartners) in responding to the program, we've aligned the first-grade curriculum to better meet the needs of the kids coming up from kindergarten," Morana said. "Because our children exceeded expectation, we're starting with mid-year (first-grade) curriculum."