

Publication: American Press;Date: Jan 29, 2009;Section: Editorial;Page: A4



AMERICAN PRESS EDITORIAL

State's pre-K efforts paying dividends

After seven years of waiting, the educators who run a pilot prekindergarten program are now able to get a glimpse of the results of their efforts.

They like what they see.

The Picard Center for Child Development and Lifelong Learning at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette has developed a program of high-quality early childhood education that is targeted at at-risk preschool-age pupils. It is based on the use of certified teachers and highly qualified aides, full-day programs and a low child-to-teacher ratio.

The program's genesis is credited to former state Superintendent of Education Cecil Picard, who was known for his emphasis on early childhood programs.

The earliest full-year participants of the program, known as LA 4, have gone through their first set of high-stakes tests, and the results of their iLEAP and LEAP test scores are encouraging. Those results show significant gains in areas of language, print and math.

An analysis of the progress of the program shows, among other items:

- 13,389 students were served statewide in 2007-08; 80 percent of those qualified for free or reduced-price lunches.
- Over the last seven years, at-risk 4-year-olds who enter the program with low levels of performance based on testing perform at or near the national average in language, print and math when they exit it.
 - Students taking part in LA 4 outscored their no-public-kindergarten peers in similar school settings on last school year's fourth-grade LEAP tests by 8 percent in language, 10 percent in math, 6 percent in science and 5 percent in social studies.
 - In the last school year, participants scored at 59 percent (with a national average of 50 percent) in print.
- LA 4 participants in 2004-05 and 2005-06 were placed in special education at a 33 percent to 43 percent lower rate than pupils with no public prekindergarten experience.
- LA 4 participants show a consistent year-to-year reduction in grade retention (being held back). Compared to students who did not attend prekindergarten, the 2005-06 LA 4 class had a 32 percent lower rate of retention.

"Research and data continue to point to high-quality early childhood education as an indicator for future student achievement, and these findings corroborate the important role the LA 4 program plays in providing those successful outcomes," said state Superintendent of Education Paul Pastorek.

Dr. Craig Ramey, the director of the Georgetown Center on Health and Education, finds that the program has shown "the strongest effects produced by any statewide pre-K program in the United States."

These findings are promising — they show a direct correlation between what a child learns very early in his or her development and how they will perform in classes later on.

Should LA 4's success continue, its expansion to cover all Louisiana preschoolers should be encouraged, but such a dream carries with it a pretty hefty price tag (see the part above about certified teachers, high-quality aides, lower pupil-to-teacher ratio and full-day programs).

With the Jindal Administration girding the state for nearly \$1 billion in budget cuts, can such a dream come true?