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Raising the bar

Big gains seen for parish in pre-K education

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It's an average day at Truman Montessori where the entire student body is made up of 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds.

In the library, students giggle while touching plastic dinosaur figurines and listening to a story about the creatures. Outside, one class runs to the sidewalk to escape the sudden rain, and while they line up, begin singing "Rain, Rain Go Away."

"They rarely sit in chairs," teacher Dana Guillory said. "Unless it's for an art project."

In a state where public education doesn't rank high in the nation, one bright spot is pre-kindergarten education. Lafayette Parish has become a model for the rest of the state, Truman principal Joan Daley said.

Lafayette Parish public schools pre-kindergarten students entered the program testing well below their national peers, but after one year made enough gains to test better than their peers, according to a new study.

The Cecil J. Picard Center for Child Development followed the some 700 pre-kindergarteners in Lafayette Parish schools in the 2007-08 school year.

In the three areas tested - language, print and math - Lafayette Parish students continually tested far below their peers and at the end of the year tested above the national average, which is the 50th percentile.

The scores are as follows:

- In language, students improved from the seventh percentile in the pretest to the 59th percentile in the post-test.
- In print, they improved from the ninth percentile to the 70th percentile.
- In math, they improved from the fifth percentile to the 52nd percentile.

Principal Daley continues to see success stories at the school. She's seen students come in who can barely talk and leave being able to speak, interact and write their names.

"After seven years of following four-year-old students in various pre-kindergarten programs across the state, it is indeed gratifying to see the progress that four-year olds in Lafayette Parish are making," center director Billy Stokes said in a release.

"The results are a testament to the high-quality classroom instruction, expertise of the instructors and the dedication of the Lafayette parish public school district."

The majority of the students participate in the state program- Cecil J. Picard LA 4 Early Childhood Program.

The parish has 32 LA 4 and next school year plans to eliminate its Head Start program and add an additional three LA 4 classes.

Guillory was a first-grade teacher at Truman before it became a pre-kindergarten only school seven years ago.

The then predominantly-black school became a Montessori school as part of the district's now resolved desegregation case.

Truman now boasts a diverse population with its ethnic make-up 56 percent black, 37 percent white, 5 percent Hispanic and 2 percent Asian.

Guillory and several other kindergarten and first-grade teachers stayed on through the transition.

"We got so many supplies. That was wonderful," Gullory said. "We were a school that barely had anything and now we have everything we could want."

When Truman transitioned into a school that uses the LA 4 program, they were showered with funding

and supplies.

The program advocated lifelong learning, and under state guidelines, teachers in the program must be certified and classes should be no larger than 20 students.

The program is free to low-income families, but last year the state Legislature approved a measure that will phase-in universal access and make the program free to all families by 2013.

Additional Facts

Want to register?

Pre-kindergarten spots are still available at Truman Montessori. To apply go to lafayettechoice.com.
