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## LA 4 students make big leaps

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For pre-kindergarten students at the University of Louisiana Monroe's Child Development Center's LA 4 program, each activity has a purpose, and each discussion has a goal.

The pre-kindergarten students learn as they play, and studies show the methods behind the play produce academic results that are long lasting.

"I have to hold it right there and then you press," 4-year-old Ava Credle told her teacher Ursia Smith. Credle participated in a class discussion on weather and then created what appeared to be an umbrella from tinker toys.

"This class is a melting pot of skills that we are trying to teach, integrated with things that the children already know," Smith said.

ULM's Child Development Center is just one of many LA 4 preschools statewide that have been proven to enhance the learning process and extend its benefits for years to come.

A report recently released by the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education shows the educational gains made by students enrolled in LA 4 translated into improved iLEAP and LEAP test performance and reveals continued educational benefits through the fourth grade.

The success of that program is being attributed to the high expectations in the LA 4 curriculum and the accountability required by the state Department of Education.

"LA 4 is required to have certified pre-K teachers and follow state standards," Ouachita Parish coordinator Mary Crandall said. "It's not just about play, but it is about developmentally appropriate learning experiences."

According to the Louisiana Department of Education, the LA 4 program has for the past seven years shown that at-risk 4-year-olds enter the program at or below the 11th percentile and exit performing at or near the national average in language, print and mathematics.

"I think these most recent analyses affirm again the immediate benefits for Louisiana's young children in key gateway skills in LA 4, particularly in reading and math," said Craig Ramey, director of the Georgetown Center on Health and Education in its analysis of the LA 4 program.

"We have strong evidence of the long-term effects ...as well as the reduction in the needs for special education and grade retention."

LA 4 served 13,389 students statewide in 2007-08. Eighty-eight percent of those students qualified for free or reduced lunch.

The only school districts in Louisiana that do not participate in LA 4 are Allen, Beauregard, Franklin, Grant, St. Charles and West Feliciana parishes.

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