

Successful Harrisburg preschool program is in jeopardy

Posted by **JOHN LUCIEW/The Patriot-News** May 28, 2007 22:07PM

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Counting is just one of the many skills 3- and 4-year-olds learn in Harrisburg School District's highly touted preschool program.

Lately, however, the numbers aren't adding up for the program, which Mayor Stephen R. Reed and Superintendent Gerald Kohn installed five years ago as the cornerstone of the then-struggling district's future.

In those five years, the Early Childhood Program, which doesn't receive money from the state, has racked up a deficit of \$5.6 million, forcing the 10,000-student city district to borrow operating cash last month and delay paying vendors.

Meanwhile, a Penn State University study shows Harrisburg's preschoolers have been gaining a leg up when they enter kindergarten and beyond.

Parent Ayesha Hernandez doesn't need a university study to know the preschool classes at Harrisburg's Downey school are working: Her daughter Arianna, 6, is thriving in kindergarten after two years of preschool.

"As a single mother, it was hard for me to teach her at home," Hernandez said. "But she learned so much in preschool -- her ABCs, how to count, how to read. I think that the program was the best thing for my daughter."

Marilyn Hartey, Downey's preschool instructional coordinator, said she knows the plight of parents all too well. That's why the children aren't the only ones getting lessons through the early childhood program.

Preschool teachers make at least six family contacts a year, including four home visits, to provide parents with tips for turning everyday life into teaching moments.

For example, the simple act of sorting laundry can become a lesson in counting, colors and vocabulary, Hartey said.

"We have parents who are trying their best to work very hard for their children, some with two to three jobs," Hartey said. "They need tips to maximize their quality time."

With that kind of progress, Debbie Reuveny, Harrisburg's Early Childhood director, said she can't contemplate reversing course.

"We have no choice; we can't go back," she said.

Kohn said an outside money source is needed because grants for the program have dried up.

"If we don't receive the funding, we are going to have to reduce the service," he said. "It would at least cut the program in half."

Such a reduction would slash Harrisburg's preschool enrollment from 560 students to well under 300, most of whom would be eligible through Capital Area Head Start.

The outside source Kohn is banking on is Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, proposed by Gov. Ed Rendell. That state program would provide \$75 million for preschool programs.

Harrisburg has applied for about \$3 million, but it is not guaranteed. The state Legislature has yet to sign off on any preschool financial support.

While state Rep. Sam Smith, the House Republican leader, has said he isn't opposed to providing money for preschools, he said the state's focus should remain on K-12 education.

The state does not directly contribute to preschool programs, which are considered voluntary.

State money for Harrisburg's preschools, coupled with an increase for Capital Area Head Start, the district's preschool partner, would not only save the program, it could allow the two organizations to begin serving some of the 600 children on their combined waiting lists.

"It would be the best-spent money in the entire state," Kohn said. "Our kids are the most needy, and the future benefit is the biggest."

For every \$1 spent on preschool, the state would save \$17 in special education and juvenile justice costs later, Kohn said, citing statistics.

The prospect of cutting preschool is unthinkable to Reuveny.

"It would be a huge loss to the community," she said. "I'm talking about an emotional and educational loss. This program has made a difference for our children and our families."

There's growing evidence to prove it.

An ongoing Penn State study, being conducted by the Prevention Research Center for the Promotion of Human Development, shows Harrisburg's preschool-educated kids score better than their non-preschool peers in vocabulary, letter identification and math.

What's more, the scoring advantage for children with two years of preschool is more than double that of those who attended only one year.

The study will continue to track Harrisburg's preschoolers through fifth grade.

Kohn and Reuveny said the study is showing the start of a rising tide. They expressed confidence that the program would have a far-reaching ripple effect, fueling the district's successes for years to come.

"It's not an immediate kind of thing," Reuveny said. "It's something you will see 10 years down the road."

BY THE NUMBERS

Facts about Harrisburg's preschool program:

Students: 560

Classes: 35

Class size: 16 per class

District staff: 32

Total cost: \$5.3 million

District share: \$3.2 million.

Capital Area Head Start share: \$2.1 million

Harrisburg five-year deficit for preschool: \$5.6 million.