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Educators voice support for prekindergarten classes

But legislators wonder how to fund program

BY AMBER ELLIS
News Democrat

Ashanti Fuller knows her ABCs. She can write her name. And the 3-year-old has no trouble counting or rattling off what she's learned in class.

Her younger brother, Billy, wants to be just like her.

"He tries to do everything his big sister does," said their mother, Jacqueline Smarr. "She comes home every day with homework. You can see the difference in what she's learned since last year."

Ashanti is one of 40 students enrolled in prekindergarten classes at the East St. Louis Developmental Center.

Local educators and prekindergarten supporters met there Thursday afternoon to discuss their support of Gov. Rod Blagojevich's "Preschool for All" proposal, which would, in the next five years, provide classes for all 3- and 4-year-olds.

"When you read a book, you start with the first chapter," said Cahokia Schools Superintendent Jana Bechtoldt, comparing education to reading. "You don't start in the middle of the book and expect to be able to comprehend the whole story. So let's start with the first chapter."

Her district has six prekindergarten classes: five full-day classes for 3- and 4-year-olds, and one class with two half-day sessions for early 3-year-olds. Right now, there are 350 to 400 students enrolled in the programs.

There's been progress, but "we still don't have enough funding for all of our 3-year-olds," said Bechtoldt, of District 187.

When Cahokia teachers found that some students started their career in kindergarten failing, the district created a kindergarten readiness program that helps children catch up with their classmates.

In East St. Louis, 640 students in that age group are enrolled in the literacy-based classes.

Despite an increase in classes offered and more teachers hired, some children are unable to get in classes. At least 200 children are on the waiting list, said Christine Smith, director of the district's early-childhood program.

Although both districts have programs available, some parents don't have a way to get their children there. Satellite sites are set up in East St. Louis to provide an option closer to home.

Transportation, the superintendents agreed, is just one thing the proposal could help fund.

The initiative would make Illinois the first state to offer preschool to all 3-year-olds and the fourth state to provide classes to 3-and 4-year-olds.

The program would be optional for children and would cost the state at least \$135 million in its first three years with little information about future costs.

While the idea of universal preschool has gained support from most educators, local legislators say they support the proposal in theory but don't think the governor has explained how to pay for the multimillion-dollar plan.

"All of these programs cost money," said Rep. Ron Stephens, R-Greenville. "The governor comes up with great ideas for spending money. But with the state's indebtedness, he's making a promise that we may not be able to keep."

With few details about the plan released, it's hard to take sides at this point, said Patty Schuh, spokesman for Senate Minority Leader Frank Watson, R-Greenville.

"We're concerned because of the price tag of the program," she said. "And the potential to take money away from schools that are already struggling and may not have the money they need to get the job done."

Rep. Tom Holbrook, D-Bellefonte, said it's important to eliminate, or at least reduce, the state's current debt before adding new programs. The program would need to be properly funded for him to vote in its favor.

"Is it needed? Yes. Would it be productive? Absolutely. Is it one of the top proposals for education? Yes," Holbrook said. "But can we afford it? We'll have to wait and see."

Contact reporter Amber Ellis at aellis@bnd.com or 239-2535