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Educators support 'Preschool for All'

By Georgina Gustin

EAST ST. LOUIS - A week after Gov. Rod Blagojevich announced a plan to offer preschool to all 3- and 4-year-olds in Illinois, educators and advocates here formally joined a chorus of supporters who say preschool is the key to lifetimes of better learning.

"It's very difficult to catch up when they start behind," said East St. Louis schools Superintendent Theresa Saunders on Thursday. "I think this will be a wonderful opportunity for our district and for the state generally."

If legislators approve the plan, Illinois will become the first state to offer preschool to all 3- and 4-year-olds. The plan, dubbed "Preschool for All," will cost \$45 million in each of the next three years and will enable any parent who wants to send a child to preschool to do so for free.

At a news conference Thursday at the Lessie Bates Davis Neighborhood House, a community development center, area educators stressed that preschool is the foundation for a good education. Even simple things, like learning to follow basic instructions, can give pupils and teachers a leg up.

"If there's no pre-K, kids can't even stand in line," said Joyce Smith, a director at Lessie Bates Davis, "That's hard on teachers."

Jana Bechtoldt, superintendent of the Cahokia School District, told the gathering that roughly 50 percent of the children in her district are not getting the preschool foundation they need.

"When you read a book, you start with the first chapter," Bechtoldt said. "You don't start in the middle and expect to comprehend the whole book."

In the Cahokia district, 80 percent of students live at or below the poverty line, Bechtoldt said, making preschool funding especially important.

"We need money for transportation, too," Bechtoldt added. "Money is dwindling and we're barely able to keep up with staffing."

For community-based preschool programs, like one launched at Lessie Bates Davis last year, the Blagojevich plan could provide money for expansion.

"The school district could not accommodate all the children who are eligible for pre-K," Smith said. "I think with this we can offer more services."

Critics of the Blagojevich proposal have asked whether the state can find the money for the program.

"There are those who have raised the question, are we certain about the science, and the answer is an unequivocal yes," said Jerry Stermer, president of Voices for Illinois Children, an early-childhood education advocacy group. "The second question is can we afford it? ... Here again, the answer is can we afford not to."

East St. Louis Mayor Carl Officer called the plan "the most important ever introduced into the Legislature."

"We spend \$45,000 to \$50,000 to incarcerate people in Illinois," he said. "We spend \$10,000 a year to educate them. There's something drastically wrong with that balance, or imbalance."