

'Start behind, stay behind'

Report stresses early education for area children

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A new education report shows how early childhood experiences, such as pre-kindergarten education, better prepare Charlottesville and Albemarle County students for kindergarten and result in tangible achievement differences.

The new findings, scheduled for release today, are a part of "Ready for Kindergarten: The State of Local School Readiness in Charlottesville and Albemarle."

The report was done by a work group of Smart Beginnings, an area initiative of the Charlottesville-Albemarle Partnership for Children, and used data and assessment scores from the 2007-08 academic year. That year, 1,387 kindergarteners were enrolled between the two divisions and there were 7,743 children aged 5 or younger.

"All too often those who start behind, stay behind," said Miriam Rushfinn, the director of Smart Beginnings. The school-readiness initiative was created in 2007.

"Invest early, and we won't ... have to invest as much later," Rushfinn said.

A majority of city and county

Ready for school?

A new study by the Smart Beginnings initiative of the Charlottesville/Albemarle Partnership for Children examines how preschool experiences improve school readiness and achievement among local kindergarteners. Some key points:

- » 83 percent of disadvantaged children with early learning experiences met language and literacy benchmarks during the fall of kindergarten, compared with 60 percent without.
- » High quality child care is limited. Only four local child care centers and preschools are nationally accredited.

- » 71 percent of city students and 81 percent in Albemarle have had some kind of pre-kindergarten education.
- » Better data analysis and reporting could improve the ability to measure school readiness and increase program accountability.
- » Access to voluntary public or private preschool programs should expand to serve all low-income 3- and 4-year-olds.

kindergarteners — at 71 percent and 81 percent, respectively — had some type of pre-kindergarten education.

Yet the report also said that 160 children in Charlottesville and Albemarle entered kindergarten in need of additional academic assistance, and that quality childcare is limited in the localities — 6 percent of children up to 5 years old, or 485, participated in the area's three public preschool programs.

Those programs are the city schools' preschool programs, the county's Bright Stars and Head Start through the Monticello Area Community Action Agency.

While preschool might be perceived by some as mostly play, Bright Stars program coordinator Charity Haines said "there's a purpose to all that play. There certainly is a seriousness of purpose here."

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Key study recommendations include:

- Increase the quality and accessibility of childcare and family support services in the area;
- Improve the ability to measure school readiness and program accountability; and
- Strengthen public-private partnerships to capitalize on the area's resources. The report examined the correlation between enrollment in preschool programs and how Charlottesville and Albemarle students fared on kindergarten Phonological Awareness Literacy Screenings, or PALS, in the fall and spring.

Data showed that of those kindergarten students with such program experience, 93 percent and 95 percent, respectively, achieved the required

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assessment benchmarks in the fall and the spring. Those who did not had 72 percent and 84 percent passing rates.

Economically disadvantaged students who had pre-kindergarten education also fared just as well, if not better, than non-disadvantaged students who did not partake in those programs.

According to the report, achievement benchmarks were met by 83 percent of both the aforementioned groups during fall testing.

In the spring, 90 percent of disadvantaged students with pre-kindergarten experience achieved the necessary benchmarks, compared with 87 percent of non-disadvantaged students without pre-kindergarten learning. Sixty percent of disadvantaged students with no prior learning met the benchmarks.

The report said 58 disadvantaged kindergarten students in the city had no known pre-kindergarten experience, compared with 93 in the county.

"We're beginning to have a communitywide understanding of the critical nature of this area," Rushfinn said. "None of this data was available before."

Early childhood education has been receiving high levels of attention this year. Area interfaith group IMPACT, or the Interfaith Movement Promoting Action by Congregations Together, decided that it would work this year toward bolstering early childhood education.

The group has sought commitments from local leaders to implement a plan that would quantify the unmet need of quality preschool for the region's children and to reflect on contributions for kindergarten readiness.

Dennis McAuliffe, pastor of Charlottesville's Holy Comforter Catholic Church and IMPACT's co-chairman, said on Wednesday that "We're basically going to ratchet that issue back up" in the fall.

The new report, he said, "is going to be a part of the discussion for sure."

Rushfinn said that city and county data were combined because the results were largely similar between test scores.

"People so often assume there are dramatic differences," she said. There were differences in the number of disadvantaged students who participated in early childhood programs in the two localities, but the test data did not follow the same pattern.

"We found that quite often," Rushfinn said.

Rushfinn said that for preschool education to improve, she thinks new programs will need to be created as well as expanding existing ones.

A grant totaling nearly \$6 million that Charlottesville and Albemarle recently received may help that endeavor.

City schools spokeswoman Cass Cannon said the division would use part of its funding to expand its 3-year-old preschool program, which will have three classes, and to add more early education support staff.

Haines said that the county would also be adding another family worker for its current preschool programs.