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School prep program viewed as model

State urged to expand initiative after Chemung districts show 50% improvement in kindergarten readiness

Developers of a free, universal program that's helping prepare Chemung County children for kindergarten are pushing for policymakers to expand the initiative throughout New York.

The School Readiness Project, a venture headed by former state Board of Regents chancellor Carl Hayden, has improved kindergarten readiness in Chemung County's three school districts by nearly 50 percent, according to a recent University at Albany study.

Now, Hayden, who also recently chaired the State University of New York Board of Trustees, wants to replicate that success elsewhere.

"I am going to make as strong a pitch as I can that what everybody's been looking for is hidden in plain view," Hayden said. "Shame on us for having neglected the most important five years in the educational lives of our children."

He will be testifying next month at the Rochester meeting of Gov. Andrew Cuomo's New NY Education Reform Commission. He said he also plans to propose to his former colleagues on the K-12 board that they consider backing a plan to incentivize similar programs statewide.

The initiative is based on research that shows stimulating infants' brains from age zero to 5 is paramount to their success throughout their entire educational careers.

"When a child enters school and is not intellectually, socially and emotionally ready for that experience, that child's future is likely already fixed," Hayden said. "And not only will that child be behind, but that child will fall further and further behind as the years pass, irrespective of the amount of time and money spent in remediation."

He argues the preventative program costs much less than what the state spends on remedial courses in college, which are non-credit-bearing classes that students take to

learn what they didn't learn in high school. SUNY community colleges spend more than \$70 million per year on remediation, according to state officials.

The School Readiness Project costs about \$400 per child per year. It has served more than 4,500 children since 2006.

The program's start-up funds were pledged by both a community foundation and the county, each contributing \$1 million over five years.

County Executive Tom Santulli committed the county's support, seeing the program as a sound taxpayer investment, he said in a statement.

"Using only existing resources and an innovative approach, the School Readiness Project is already strengthening this community, and we look forward to seeing its continued impact in our schools, neighborhoods and local economy," he said.

More than 90 percent of the families with children who were born in Chemung County since 2006, when the School Readiness Project began, are enrolled. There are no income requirements.

In fall 2007, 47.5 percent of the incoming kindergarten classes in the county were considered ready to begin school, based on observations of the kids' motor skills, ability to complete tasks and their literacy — whether they could identify letters and numbers — among other indicators. In fall 2011, the first cohort of kids who were enrolled in the School Readiness Project from birth, scored 68.6 percent proficient. That nearly cuts in half the number of kindergartners considered unready for school.

"The overall result, statistically speaking, is astounding," said Ken Robbin, senior research scientist at the University at Albany's Center for Human Services Research. "In a four-year period, the percentage of entering kindergartners in Chemung County who were deemed school-ready rose 21 percent."

A child is enrolled in the program immediately after birth. Still in the maternity ward at a local hospital, a family is greeted by a nurse who invites them to join the program. If they say yes, a nurse makes periodic home visits to help parents create a healthy learning environment for the children.

“A trained community health nurse goes into someone’s home and helps them understand all of the important milestones kids reach, and how you, as a parent, can help your child develop even better,” said Randi Hewit, president of the Community Foundation of Elmira-Corning and the Finger Lakes, Inc.

For example, experiencing proper nutrition and a daily routine with a consistent bedtime maximizes learning potential in children. The nurse would also encourage the parent to play with and read to the child.

Additionally, program staff work with child-care providers and pediatricians in the area to focus efforts on boosting learning potential.

The child-care providers are given training in promoting literacy.

Advertising and working to improve existing community resources like parenting classes or child-care services helps to keep expenses down while extending the program’s benefit beyond just the families who are involved.

Not only do program administrators hope to see a long-term change in their students, they also hope to stimulate the economy by providing a high-skilled workforce and attracting businesses.

“Our students may reap the immediate rewards, but the whole community stands to gain from the benefits of a better-prepared generation of children,” said Joseph Hochreiter, Elmira City School District superintendent, in a statement.

Beyond its direct intentions, the program indirectly contributes to other causes. If there is domestic violence in a home, for example, the program nurses can help the party being abused get help. If a parent is a smoker, the nurse can direct him or her to free smoking-cessation resources, therefore encouraging a smoke-free environment for the children.

“Every parent can benefit from information and support, no matter who they are,” said Darlene Batrowny, coordinator of the project’s home visitation component.

“We just hope that the support and involvement of the parents, the schools and the community partners will provide the best possible start for children in Chemung County,” she said. “They are our future.”