

Total Learning called success by state team

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BRIDGEPORT — Total Learning, an interdisciplinary approach to elementary education that infuses art, music and dance into instruction, has proved its value here and could be beneficially adapted in other communities, a state monitoring team has concluded.

The program also offers teachers a full-time classroom aide and parents extra help at home. It has been employed on a limited scale in city schools for two years, starting in one kindergarten class at Columbus School during 2006-07 and expanded to 16 classes at Batalla, Roosevelt, Longfellow, Blackham, Waltersville and Barnum in the last academic year.

Funding for the program has come largely from the state, which last year awarded grants of \$1.2 million for each of the next two years to Action for Bridgeport Community Development, a local anti-poverty agency and the driving force behind Total Learning.

ABCD sees the program as a way to sustain gains made by students in Head Start preschool programs into their elementary grades.

In June, a two-member site team from the state Department of Education that included Yemi Onibokum and Scott Shuler visited Total Learning classrooms to assess how the state money was being used. They liked what they saw and heard. One teacher with 18 years experience told

Onibokum the Total Learning training she received was the best she ever had.

The program "is a new way of laying a successful foundation for learning readiness," according to the team's report. "It presents a new approach to early childhood education and curriculum planning."

It goes on to urge that fiscal support for the program be continued and its replication in other towns be examined.

William Bevacqua, assistant director of ABCD, said the program will expand this fall to 19 kindergartens and six first grades.

As was the case last year, some classes will get the full model with an aide, after-school component and parental support. Others will get only the extra teacher training.

ABCD would like to see at least two of the first-grade classes get the full model and have indicated they will pay for the paraprofessionals to see that it happens.

School officials could not say this week if that will happen. In a written statement, Supt. of Schools John Ramos called the Total Learning initiative a viable option that the district supports.

The program is also under review by the Michael Cohen Group, a consulting firm hired by ABCD to make suggestions for improvement and study the program's effectiveness in a scientific manner. Evaluators found students getting the full Total Learning treatment achieved the biggest scoring jumps in reading.

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