

## Kindergartners gain with Total Learning

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BRIDGEPORT — Total Learning helped some of the lowest-scoring students in a city kindergarten class achieve bigger test score gains than students in a control group, evaluators told school and community officials Wednesday.

The gains, though preliminary and based on a small number of students, won plaudits not only from lawmakers, but also from Edward Zigler, a Yale University professor and father of the nation's Head Start program for preschoolers.

"So far, so good," Zigler said of the instructional program.

Considered an expert on human development and the effects of poverty on children, Zigler is sold on the program because it hits on all four influences on a child's growth that he has been emphasizing for 50 years: family, health care, school and after-school childcare.

The presentation on Total Learning's record so far in the Bridgeport schools took place at the offices of Action for Bridgeport Community Development, the local antipoverty agency and primary sponsor of the project.

Total Learning infuses art, music and movement into lessons. It has been used on a limited scale in city schools for two years, starting in one kindergarten class at Columbus School in 2006-07, and expanded to 16 classes at Batalla, Roosevelt, Longfellow, Blackham, Waltersville and Barnum schools in the last academic year.

Eight classes got the full model with an extra classroom aide, on-going teacher training, an after-school program and a liaison to help parents with

issues that affect student learning. Eight classes got only the teacher training component.

Roosevelt Principal Carmen Perez Dickson said Total Learning has helped strengthen the vocabulary of bilingual students.

Longfellow Principal James Adams said more kindergartners at his school achieved grade-appropriate reading benchmarks than ever before. "So, thank you, Total Learning," he said.

Next year, the program will be in 25 classes, including seven first-grade rooms. The price tag is in excess of \$2.5 million.

To expand the model fully as ABCD officials envision, would cost \$5,000 per child yearly above the amount that Bridgeport spends now, said Bob Neiman, a member of the Harvard Business School Club of Connecticut, who is working with ABCD. To expand the project through 2014 would cost \$58 million, he added.

Charles Tisdale, the ABCD executive director, said he is not sure where all the money will come from.

Supt. of Schools John Ramos said it is no surprise that students given the full Total Learning approach did so much better. Still, he said, the program exists because of funds Tisdale has been able to cobble together from various sources. The city's education budget cannot add anything, he said.

The General Assembly a year ago approved a \$1.2 million grant for the program. About half that amount remains to be spent. Tisdale said he is seeking federal and private dollars to cover the rest.

State Rep. Robert Keeley, D-Bridgeport, who attended the session, said he wants the funding for Total Learning to increase.

Tisdale said if the Legislature wants to make good on a pledge to reduce child poverty significantly by 2014, Total Learning is a model that deserves support.

In the two years that Total Learning has been used in the city's schools, the program has been studied by the Michael Cohen Group of New York. Michael Cohen, president of the group, said his firm has had a dual role to offer suggestions for improvement and study the program's effectiveness in a scientific manner.

The evaluators gave a Developmental Reading Assessment test to students in October and May. While all students were moving in the right direction, he said, 114 students who scored the lowest in October in the full Total Learning classes achieved the biggest jump in scores by May.

Their growth was 2.148 compared to 1.397 for the control group. Children in classes getting only Total Learning teacher training saw growth of 1.632.

"It shows the children who need it the most are the ones benefiting from it," said Minda Frank, a co-project director for the study.

Frank said more data will be available in weeks to come.

Zigler called the results preliminary, yet promising.

"You need evidence. You won't know benefits of this program until these children are through the fourth grade. I will continue to watch over this project," he said.