

Researchers study Total Learning program

By LINDA CONNER LAMBECK
lclambeck@ctpost.com

BRIDGEPORT — Researchers who will help determine if an experimental early-childhood program can

Total Learning

A continuing look at an experiment in the classroom

help city students close achievement gaps got a first look Tuesday at the Columbus School kindergarten class where it is in place.

place.

Michael Cohen, managing partner of the New York City-based Michael Cohen Group, LLC, with colleagues Jocelyn Kiley and Minda Frank, spent about an hour at the school where the Total Learning approach has been used in one classroom since the start of the school year.

They later met with officials from Action for Bridgeport Community Development, the anti-poverty agency promoting Total Learning, as well as with officials from the city's public schools.

Total Learning uses a multifaceted approach of art, music, drama and movement to teach the kindergarten curriculum. ABCD hopes to learn if that approach, combined with a longer school day, help for parents and a small class size can consolidate gains made by students in Head Start preschool classes.

Total Learning is already being used in one classroom. Next year, ABCD hopes to expand the program.

Cohen, whose firm's clients include the U.S. Department of Education, Walt Disney Co. and "Sesame Street," said he was impressed with what he saw. "It's the best petri dish to go into," Cohen said of the classroom.

He also called Sandra Carolina, the teacher who took over the Total Learning class in November after the first teacher left, a "good and classic teacher."

"If you called central casting and said, 'Get me a good solid kindergarten classroom,' this would be it," Cohen said.



Brian A. Peasants/Connecticut Post

Social scientists, from left, Jocelyn Kiley, Minda Frank and Michael Cohen, of The Michael Cohen Group, are evaluating Bridgeport's experimental Total Learning early-childhood program.

"She's very strong, very positive. It's a classroom where we can introduce Total Learning without being concerned or worried that we're making up for deficits or idiosyncrasies in teaching."

Cohen said it is uncertain what his study of the Total Learning system will look like, since too many variables are unknown. It's also not certain how many classes eventually will be involved and at what grade levels, or even how students will be tested.

Some of those factors will depend on how much money Charles Tisdale, director of ABCD, can secure for the project. So far, he has had a number of state officials, including Gov. M. Jodi Rell, visit the classroom.

The one-year price tag on the Columbus School class — between costs for training and evaluation — is said to be \$750,000. Of that, \$150,000 was set aside for the Cohen Group.

This year, the study group will observe the development of the program in the Columbus

kindergarten class and prepare a report that will tell ABCD and the school system how a randomized study to evaluate the program will be conducted.

It's anticipated that to study the effectiveness of Total Learning, some classes will use the program and others will not. All other aspects of the classes — their size, length of school day, curriculum and parental support — would have to be the same for the comparison to work, Cohen said.

Frank, the senior research director for the Cohen Group, said she and Kiley will periodically visit the classroom to help Sue Snyder, developer of the Total Learning approach, refine her model.

Next year, once the broader experiment starts, there will be no more intervention, Cohen said.

Cohen, describing his role as a social scientist, said the study group has an international client base that focuses largely on childhood and adolescent development.

After the terrorist attacks of

Sept. 11, 2001, Cohen was asked by then-New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani to study the mental health impact of the incident on children in the city.

His firm is also working on a five-year study for the U.S. Department of Education, assessing the use of media — everything from computers to television to hand-held video games — in education.

The group also met with officials from ABCD and Deborah Santacapita, director of evaluation for the school system.

Santacapita said her role will be to keep tabs on the study group and report back to the superintendent's office.

Santacapita also visited Carolina's class Tuesday and said she enjoyed it.

"The kids were very well engaged and on task. When a child needed to be redirected, the teacher did a wonderful job," she said.

Linda Conner Lambeck, who covers regional education issues, can be reached at 330-6218.