

JETS HOLD ON TO BEAT BUFFALO; GIANTS BLOWN OUT IN SEATTLE SportsPlus, C1

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CLASS BLAZES NEW TRAILS

Plan aims to help
children overcome



underprivileged backgrounds

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BRIDGEPORT — A liberal amount of Elmer's Glue and elbow macaroni went into the M's created by a group of students in Doreen Miller's kindergarten class at Columbus School.

Other students used scissors to cut from grocery circulars pictures of food that begin with the letter M. The goal was to create a menu.

Another group played a card game, matching words like muffin, monkeys and milk.

Adults were at all three groups of youngsters in the classroom, while a fourth prepared to bang a tambourine to signal cleanup time.

"Eventually, we'll have an M on the floor and they'll all walk it," said Sue Snyder, one of the many visitors with an eye on this particular class.

Made up entirely of Head Start graduates, the class is laying the groundwork for an experiment to see if a longer

school day, a smaller class size, and "Total Learning" — a prescribed curriculum tapping into all the senses — can overcome an underprivileged background. The goal is to ensure that academic gains are not just for the short-term, but all through a child's schooling.

Officials plan to expand the program next year into a full-blown control study with 25 classrooms immersed in the "Total Learning" curriculum.

"One of the overriding considerations of the Total Learning program is the ability to replicate," said Snyder, president of Arts Education IDEAS and the creator of Total Learning.

"We want to be able to turn it over to any school system anywhere and say this kind of thing works. It can be transferred into public education anywhere. That is a major part of this," she said.

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Paraprofessional Keisha Sundar, above, works with students Christian Romero and Sinqway Williams at Columbus Elementary School in Bridgeport as part of a program aimed at helping children from underprivileged backgrounds overcome obstacles. Right, Sundar and Rosemay Marquez, center, talk with Sinqway and fellow kindergartner Sarah Oliveria.



Keisha Sundar, left, works with kindergartner Sinqway Williams while Reishaun Rodriguez looks up. Their class is laying the groundwork for an experiment to see if a longer school day, a smaller class size, and "Total Learning" can overcome obstacles.

Extended school day part of experiment

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Studies show that although preschool and all-day kindergarten programs prepare urban children to do well at school in later years, the gains tend to disappear by the fourth grade.

Action for Bridgeport Community Development, the anti-poverty agency that runs Head Start programs in the city, initiated the experiment to try to prevent the backslide.

The agency recruited 21 Head Start graduates entering kindergarten at Columbus.

Unlike Columbus' other two kindergarten classes, the Total Learning class is five to eight students smaller. Its day starts at 7:30 a.m., an hour earlier than the rest of the school, and Total Learning students stay until 5:30 p.m., two hours after regular dismissal.

The Total Learning class will attend school over the summer and be grouped together through fourth grade.

This year, the classroom they use — the school's former music room, complete with a stage area — is bigger than the other kindergarten classrooms. In addition to Miller, the teacher, there are two classroom aides — Keisha Sundar and Rosemary Marquez — and usually a fourth adult, who models lessons and coaches the teacher and paraprofessionals in how to carry out the Total Learning curriculum.

The curriculum uses music, movement, visual arts and drama to stimulate senses and help students learn.

Snyder said Total Learning has been in existence for eight years. It is used on a limited basis in other Columbus School classrooms, as well as in a couple of Hartford schools and in Michigan and New Jersey.

Estimates are the one-year price tag on the program is \$750,000, said Charles Tisdale, executive director of ABCD.

"It would cost more, but we asked people for in-kind contributions, courtesy discounts," Tisdale said.

For instance, some of the equipment in the classroom came from the closed Newfield School, Snyder said.

Roughly \$400,000 of this year's cost will go for training,



Kindergartner Sarah Oliveria searches through a newspaper to find items to cut out for a group project last week at Columbus Elementary School in Bridgeport. Made up entirely of Head Start graduates, the class is laying the groundwork for an experiment to see if a longer school day, a smaller class size, and "Total Learning" — a prescribed curriculum tapping into all the senses — can overcome an underprivileged background.

Whitney Kollar/Albany/Connecticut Post

the imbedded coaches and the Total Learning curriculum. Another \$150,000 will be spent on the program's evaluation, which will be provided by the Michael Cohen Group. The rest goes toward the after-school and summer-school components, supplies and equipment, and social services offered to parents to keep the students' family lives stable.

The money is coming from several sources. The federal government is paying \$100,000. Another \$45,000 is coming from the state. The Board of Education, which is paying the salaries of the teacher and one of the aides, is chipping in

\$95,000. Another \$400,000 is being raised privately, Tisdale said.

"I don't think we're going to have any problem raising the money we need in order to do this in years one, two, three and four," he said.

Tisdale likened the work of finding a cure for poverty — using schools as the focal point — to the work and ex-

pende it takes to find a cure for cancer.

The plan, he said, is to add another kindergarten class as this year's class moves to first grade next year, and so on.

"This year is the prototype," Tisdale said. "This approach has to be tested and proven before other communities will buy into it and replicate it."