

Lieberman visits Total Learning program

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Sen. Joe Lieberman sings along with children at Columbus Elementary School in Bridgeport on Monday. During the visit, Lieberman interacted with students from the Total Learning program. (John Galayda/Connecticut Post)

BRIDGEPORT — U.S. Sen. Joe Lieberman on Monday got a taste of what "Total Learning" means for an experimental kindergarten class at Columbus School, then held court in the principal's office with a dozen people vying for his attention.

They were told they had nine minutes to make their case.

June Malone, director of early childhood education for Action for Bridgeport Community Development, talking as fast as she could, told the senator about efforts to consolidate gains that preschoolers make as they move into the public schools' kindergarten classes and beyond.

Sue Snyder, creator of Total Learning, which aims to deliver curriculum through art, music, drama and movement, promoted a plan to expand the experiment into a full-blown study of up to 28 classes next fall.

Dr. Darcy I. Lowell, director of Bridgeport Hospital's Child FIRST Community Partnership, told Lieberman that success for the program also rides on efforts to get services for parents of students in the program.

Lieberman said he would do what he could to get the program federal funding.

"We are losing all these children every day," he said "I feel we're at a point where we have to be bold. We have to experiment. They have to learn."

Lieberman said he hopes to get \$500,000 allocated by an Appropriations Subcommittee, but noted that so-called "earmarks" — money set aside for particular projects — are harder to come by these days.

"There's talk of reducing earmarks by 50 percent, but this is a unique program," he said. Lieberman is also a friend of Charles Tisdale, executive director of ABCD, the anti-poverty agency that is the driving force behind the Total Learning experiment.

Tisdale hopes to piece together up to \$3 million from federal, state and private sources to finance the experiment.

Despite some problems, Tisdale said he is more than satisfied with how the program has played out.

Three months into the school year, the first teacher in the Total Learning classroom was replaced. The new teacher had to be trained in Total Learning techniques.

In addition to the different instructional approach, the class is two hours longer than the traditional six-hour school day. It also has fewer students.

Next year, the kindergarten class is not expected to stay together. Instead, Total Learning will be introduced to a first-grade class at Columbus.

If the study plays out as anticipated, eight kindergarten classrooms in Bridgeport schools would get the full Total Learning experience, including the extended day and family support services. Eight other classes would get Total Learning within the confines of a regular six-hour school day. Another dozen classes that do not offer Total Learning will also be studied as part of the project.

Tisdale said it is uncertain where those classes will be. Some could be outside the city's public school system, he said.

Snyder, president of Arts Education IDEAS in Norwalk, said one early sign of success is that the Total Learning class this year is reading at a higher level than the other two kindergarten classes at Columbus.

Snyder said students in the class are articulate and confident, although an afternoon visit from Lieberman seemed too much for some.

Lieberman, accompanied by his wife Hadassah, assured Snyder it was not a problem when a performance the class rehearsed for the senator didn't go off as planned.

Before visiting the class, Lieberman visited preschoolers who demonstrated a program that involved parents and toddlers sitting on a rug, singing songs and playing instruments. It's part of ABCD's efforts to create an educational program that would encompass children from birth through 9 years old.

"Hello, everybody," said Lieberman, as he took off his jacket, sat down on the rug and joined the circle, clapping hands and singing.

"Thank you for being without question the best part of our day," he told them.



Dr. Susan Snyder, president of Art Education Ideas, instructs a Total Learning program class Monday at Columbus Elementary School in Bridgeport. (John Galayda/Connecticut Post)