

Rell gets Total Learning tour

By LINDA CONNER LAMBECK
lclambeck@ctpost.com

BRIDGEPORT — After coaxing from Gov. M. Jodi Rell, Sarah Olivera, 5, dutifully added an "A" between the two "D's" she had fashioned from wax-coated yarn sticks and sounded out the word she had made.

"Very good," said the state's chief executive.

"Miss, look at mine," said Tamia Davis, tapping Rell's shoulder Wednesday in hopes of receiving similar attention from the latest VIP and her entourage to visit the Columbus School Total Learning kindergarten class in recent weeks.

"The governor is someone who's important," Tamia later said.

But this class of 5-year-olds is getting used to crowds of important visitors.

Already in their brief 10 weeks in school, the kindergartners have played host to city leaders, state representatives, a U.S. congressman, several political candidates and dozens of local and state educators, all hoping to get a peek at an education-reform experiment in the making.

The class, which uses a curriculum called Total Learning, is steeped in music, art and movement designed to tap into all the ways information can be absorbed by young minds.

Head Start graduates all, the students are supposed to stay together through the fourth grade to see if the gains made in preschool can be sustained. In addition to the curriculum, the students have a longer school day and their parents have access, should they need it, to social services provided by Action for Bridgeport Community Development.

ABCD is spearheading the Total Learning experiment. The anti-poverty agency hopes



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Gov. M. Jodi Rell visits the Total Learning kindergarten classroom at Columbus School in Bridgeport. Rell shared a worktable with students, from left, Sarah Olivera, Danaja Edmonds and Nakyra Edwards, and paraprofessional Rosemary Marquez.

to expand the program next year to dozens of city classrooms, with state funding to help make it happen.

Rell, who spent about 15 minutes in the class, watched one group of students twirl scarves in opposite directions — an exercise designed to get both sides of the brain working. She listened to another group hum the "duh, duh, duh" sound as they decorated "Ds" with dots.

And she heard an encore of "Deedle, deedle, dumpling," a song the class performed Monday for interim state Education Commissioner George Coleman.

Rell, who has touted effective preschool as a way to bridge the achievement gap between urban and suburban kids, said she was impressed.

"Having these early experiences are key to getting results. We're seeing that already here," the governor said as she rose from a pint-size table and was led to another center by Charles Tisdale, director of ABCD.

Though she made no promises about funding, Sue Snyder, who developed the To-

tal Learning curriculum used in the classroom, said the governor "gets it."

"She was incredibly receptive. She understands about research that talks about birth-to-9 initiatives. This [program] is it. Someone is doing it," Snyder said. "And we have the pieces that come next, all ready to go."

Fritz Mesidor, whose son is one of the kindergartners, said he was pleased to meet the governor, and added the children don't seem to mind all the visitors.

"I think they like it," he said. Snyder said the students in the class are doing well and are not unduly distracted by all the attention. "If I thought they even noticed, I would worry," she said.

Doreen Miller, the classroom teacher, who monitored a corner table of students during Rell's visit — where students used leaves to make animal shapes — seemed less convinced.

The class has a longer school day, but Miller said some students leave at 3 p.m., making it hard to make up the curriculum time lost.

Total Learning
A consulting tool
at an experiment
in the classroom