

Teaching method expands to 16 classes

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Total Learning trainer Allison Abucewicz, center, worked with kids in a kindergarten class at Cesar Batalla School in Bridgeport as part of the Total Learning program which has expanded from one classroom to sixteen throughout the city. Abucewicz established auditory skills in the students by having them imitate a percussion pattern. (Tracy Deer-Mirek/Connecticut Post)

BRIDGEPORT — "Same, same, same, different."

In 14 kindergarten classrooms this fall, students are chanting the phrase as they clap and snap their fingers to a beat.

"There is a high correlation between keeping a steady beat and being able to read," whispered Mary Beth Stickley, the district's director of early childhood education, while watching a Cesar Batalla School classroom.

In a nearby first grade — one of two first grades this year using the "Total Learning" approach — an echo is heard, driving home the "th" sound to first-graders.

"Beth, Beth, Beth, Beth. Thin, thin, thin, thin," the class shouts as they rhythmically pat their knees and tap the floor, a pattern suggested by the 6-year-olds who suggested the "th" words they would repeat.

"It's fun and it works," pronounced second-year teacher Candice King-Sadler, patting her legs along with her class as Allison Abucewicz, a Total Learning trainer, modeled a lesson.

While teachers and classes in other city schools are using teaching methods developed by the National Urban Alliance, in partnership with the Institute of Learning and other groups, Total Learning has spread from one classroom at Columbus School to 16 classrooms across eight schools.

In addition to Batalla, Total Learning is at Roosevelt, Longfellow, Blackham, Waltersville, Hall, Dunbar and Barnum schools.

Fueled by a state grant, Total Learning is being studied this year for its effectiveness by the Michael Cohen Group of New York.

"What should result is an approach that can be replicated with whatever the landscape is in terms of public school classes," said Sue Snyder, president of a Norwalk-based company whose Total Learning approach to instruction infuses art, music and movement into what students learn.

Eight classes are getting the "full model," with an extra classroom aide, year-long teacher training, an after-school component provided by the city's Lighthouse program, and a liaison to help parents with issues that affect student learning. Six other classes get just the teacher training.

One first-grade class is being used to develop a first-grade model. The second is getting teacher training because the teacher was interested and the district didn't want to say no.

The program was introduced to the school district by Action for Bridgeport Community Development Inc., an anti-poverty agency. ABCD wanted to find a way to keep academic and developmental gains they make in their Head Start preschool programs from dissipating, said Charles Tisdale, ABCD's executive director. His group teamed up with Snyder.

Deputy Supt. of School Henry Kelly said the district has cut down considerably on the number of different instructional models it employs, but lets school try programs that show promise and that staff like.

King-Sadler, the Batalla first-grade teacher, called Total Learning more structured than the approach she used last year to teach reading.

"There's music and movement and they also learn about personal space and boundaries," she said.

Stickley said the great thing about Total Learning is that it compliments the district's curriculum. The clapping and dancing and music aren't the lessons; they help drive home concepts the teacher is trying to teach. Plus, she's thrilled the program is helping pay for extra teacher aides.

Last June, the state Legislature passed funding to give ABCD \$1.2 million for each of the next two years to advance its Total Learning initiative.

According to the budget ABCD submitted to the state, it will spend about \$100,000 on teacher and teacher aide salaries; \$616,470 on teacher training and a preschool music component; \$162,800 on mental-health and behavior-modification services to be provided by Child First of Bridgeport Hospital; and \$307,530 for the Cohen study.

In addition to the state money, the school district has agreed, in a memorandum of understanding with ABCD, to fund half of the teacher aide positions.

ABCD also stands to receive \$300,000 in federal funds. Even then, ABCD officials said, they expect to come up \$300,000 short.

"We're still seeking other philanthropic sources," said William Becquava, assistant director at ABCD.

Tisdale, who has portraits of last year's Total Learning class at Columbus lining his office wall, said the ABCD organization is not getting any of the funds.

About \$138,900 of the training budget will help ABCD advance Music Together, a research-based music program for preschoolers, infants and toddlers.

Considered a bridge to Total Learning, the class works to increase quality interaction between parent and child by engaging them in song activities that promote eye contact, singing in a key children can follow, and laying the groundwork for literacy and spatial awareness skills. Tisdale became familiar with the program because his grandson was in a Music Together class in Greenwich. "I said, 'Urban kids need this,' " he said.

June Malone, director of ABCD's Head Start programs, said a dozen Head Start students got the weekly, 45-minute-long Music Together classes last year; this year 50 will. So will children in an Early Head Start program and a Bridgeport Hospital pediatric clinic program.

Abuciewicz, the trainer at Batalla, also coordinates the schedule of two other full-time trainers in addition to modeling lessons in classes at Batalla and Longfellow. As coordinator, she works to make sure every class gets the same level of support.

One lesson learned from Columbus last year was to give teachers more time to learn and try the lessons the trainers model. The teacher and trainer also meet once a week outside the classroom.

Stickley, who has observed some of the lessons, said she noticed not all student were paying attention during Abuciewicz's entire lesson — but that every one of them seemed to tune in and participate at some point.

Surrounded by 24 kindergartners in Jocelyn Robertson's classroom at Batalla, Abucewicz lets everyone have a turn at creating their own "same, same, same, different" pattern before introducing letter sounds to the equation.

Robertson said Total Learning is amazing.

"The kids love it. They're totally engaged. Most of them get it right away," she said. "I think it's a refreshing way for kids to learn."

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