

Total Learning kids, program graduate

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BRIDGEPORT — White graduation caps bobby-pinned to their heads, the Total Learning kindergarten class at Columbus School performed for yet another audience Tuesday.

The visitors who jammed their classroom to see the youngsters sing, collect awards and diplomas this time included no politicians, educators evaluating the experiment or Washington officials.

Rather, the crowd was made up of parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles wearing smiles and bearing cameras.

"Every child sitting here made progress thanks to your effort and your commitment and your concern," said Sandra Carolina, a veteran classroom teacher who came out of retirement to take over the kindergarten class last fall after the first teacher left.

The class has been an incubator for a multi-sensory approach to learning its creators hope will help graduates of Head Start programs consolidate the gains they made in preschool.

The program incorporates music, art, drama and movement into everything the students learned. Both the school and academic year for the class are longer than the typical kindergarten class in the city. The class had one teacher and two full-time aides for 19 students. A parent liaison was also available to help families with issues that could ultimately have an impact on how well students do in school.

During the ceremony, Carolina described Nayda Velasquez, the parent liaison, as the glue who held the program together.

Carolina taught 33 years before retiring in 2004. In all that time, she never had a visit from a top school official, let alone a federal education secretary, a governor, U.S. senator, congressman or state education commissioner — all of whom toured the Total Learning classroom over the course of the academic year.

"You just roll with it," Carolina said of the high-profile scrutiny.

Carolina, who returns to the classroom in July to teach the summer school portion of the program, hopes to return in the fall to teach another class using the Total Learning approach.

Before that can happen, the program needs funding.

William Bevacqua, assistant to the executive director of Action for Bridgeport Community Development, the anti-poverty agency that has been the driving force behind the program, was the only outside official at the morning ceremony.

He told parents that Charles Tisdale, ABCD's executive director, along with Sue Snyder, developer of Total Learning, and June Malone, ABCD's early childhood director, were meeting with Supt. of Schools John Ramos and Deputy Supt. Henry Kelly to discuss specific plans to expand Total Learning next fall.

"We definitely are going to be expanding Total Learning throughout the Bridgeport school system and, hopefully, eventually throughout the United States," Bevacqua said.

State and federal funding is needed for the Total Learning experiment to expand into a full-blown study that officials would like to see include as many as 28 classes next fall.

Tameka Mesidor, a parent leader in the class, said the experience had been positive.

"We all know our children can be a handful. The teachers were always there to support us in every way possible," she said.

Each child in the class got a canvas bag, personalized with their name and stuffed with books and art supplies. It was a gift from the parents group.

Among the awards handed out, one went to Giovanni Santiago for missing just one school day the entire year. More than a dozen received reading awards.

Christina Rosario, whose daughter Kristaline is in the class, said she liked everything about the program. "She learned a lot," said Rosario, adding she didn't mind the constant stream of visitors to the classroom.

"I think it was good that people could know about it," she said.

Before the ceremony, Keisha Sundar, one of two teacher aides in the classroom, read the students Dr. Seuss' "Oh, the Places You'll Go." Then the class lined up in the hallway, waiting for the "Pomp and Circumstance" march to begin.

"Who's ready for first grade?" asked Marsha Hinton, another teacher's aide.

"Me!" the youngsters all shouted.



Sin Quay Williams, 5, listens to words of encouragement from teacher Kendra Bria before her graduation ceremony from the Total Learning classroom at Columbus School in Bridgeport. (Brian A. Pounds/Connecticut Post)



Reishaun Rodriguez, 5 of Bridgeport, reacts as he receives his diploma Tuesday in the first ever graduation for students of the Total Learning classroom at Columbus School in Bridgeport. (Brian A. Pounds/Connecticut Post)