D.C. charter schools increase focus on preschool programs

BY SARAH GARLAND

At LEAP Academy, a public charter school in Southeast Washington, 4-year-olds hunched over tables, quietly practicing their writing skills. Most can't actually write entire words, so they scrawled the first letter and supplemented their stories with pictures.

When one boy covered his page with fierce black scribbles, Principal Laura Bowen leaned over his shoulder and told him to stop. "I don't want any more scribbles," she said. "I want a story."

Such encounters are part of the new frontier as the District's thriving charter-school movement expands into early-childhood programs, where per-pupil funding is higher and, advocates say, early intervention might lead to bigger gains in academic achievement.

LEAP is part of the nonprofit KIPP chain, which started with one middle school in Houston 15 years ago and now is the largest charter operator in the country. LEAP is among dozens of D.C. charters offering preschool and prekindergarten classes.

"In the first generation of charters, I think most of the charters were middle schools, because a lot of people saw at-risk students in those years," said Jack McCarthy, a charter school veteran who leads the AppleTree Institute, a District-based nonprofit group that began as a charter high school operator in 1996. AppleTree opened its first preschool 10 years ago.

Between 2002 and 2010, the number of children enrolled in D.C. charter preschools and prekindergartens jumped tenfold, from 430 to 4,346. At D.C. public schools, more than 5,200 children are enrolled in preschool and prekindergarten. (In the District, preschool programs generally enroll 3-year-olds, and prekindergarten programs enroll 4-year-olds.)

"People are starting to realize that you can avoid a lot of the pain of teaching students who are behind," McCarthy said. "It really dramatically reduces the number of children needing special education if you provide evidence-based interventions in the early years."

Samuel Meisels, president of the Eriks-...
tors is the money available. The per-pupil funding allotment for preschool is nearly $12,000; for pre-kindergarten, it's $11,629. Elementary, middle and high schools, which are allowed more students per classroom, get about $9,500 per student.

At a time of tight education budgets, Mary Filardo, executive director of the 21st Century School Fund, worries that the District's struggling high schools are being shortchanged by increased spending on early education. "It's not that education is necessarily a zero-sum game, but there's not an infinitely elastic amount of money for education," she said.

Early-childhood advocates counter that money spent on early education can help the whole system — if the programs are strong, with significant time devoted to independent play rather than teacher-directed lessons.

Not every charter meets that standard. Jacqueline Scott, a prekindergarten teacher who works at Hyde, said she left another charter preschool where the academics were too rigid. She declined to name the school.

"It was kids in chairs with pencils; and it was very structured," Scott said. "It should not be that way."

KIPP leaders say its early-education programs are different from what their schools offer in higher grades. Nearly half of the eight-hour school day for prekindergartners is focused on academic subjects, but many of the activities revolve around games and play, and there is time for naps and recess.

"When you come to school at 3 and 4 and 5 years old, you should be laughing all day and having a great time," said Bowen, the LEAP principal who was overseeing the prekindergarten writing lesson. "If we're burning kids out by 5 years old, we're defeating the mission of what we're trying to do."

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Education experts say programs for prekindergarten children, like those at LEAP Academy, should emphasize fun activities. Pupils at that age “should be laughing all day and having a great time,” says LEAP Principal Laura Bowen.