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CHILDREN MAKING SIGNIFICANT GAINS IN CITY'S EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAMS, STUDY SAYS

Mayor Richard M. Daley today announced a report that concludes Chicago's early childhood education programs are improving children's readiness for kindergarten, making the biggest gains with at-risk children.

The study -- the Chicago Program Evaluation Project (C-PEP) -- was commissioned at the Mayor's request by the City's Department of Children and Youth Services and the Chicago Public Schools to assess the effectiveness of early childhood education and suggest ways for further improvement.

"All children can learn. But some of them start well behind, and they have trouble catching up with the children who have been nurtured since birth -- either at home or in high-quality child care. So we have made it a priority to devote much more attention to the learning that takes place between birth and the age of five," Daley said in a news conference held at Guadalupe A. Reyes Children and Family Center, 1951 W. 19th St.

The study, which was facilitated by the Erikson Institute's Herr Research Center for Children and Social Policy in collaboration with CYS and CPS and contracted to Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., concluded that:

- Children at highest risk -- English language learners and those with three or more risk factors (family issues such as poverty, single parenthood and low parental education) -- made substantial progress in terms of vocabulary development, early literacy achievement, and early mathematics achievement.
- Early childhood education efforts are narrowing the achievement gap -- that the children in the study made progress relative to all children, not just to children considered "at-risk."

- Chicago's early childhood teachers are at the high end nationally of the programs' education requirements.
- Chicago classrooms provide a good foundation for children. They were found to provide a positive environment, ranking in the middle-high range for emotional support and provisions for learning. And, they are productive and well-managed (in the middle range for classroom organization). These findings of quality in C-PEP classrooms are comparable to national studies of Head Start and state Pre-K programs now known as Preschool for All..

The study also points to places where the system can be improved. For example, it says we need to work even harder to get more children into these programs at an even earlier age.

"Planning for our children's future should begin at the earliest age, said Mary Ellen Caron, Commissioner of Family and Support Services. "While children are making important progress when they start preschool at three and four years old, we need to work with them earlier, in a comprehensive way, to bring them up to national norms—and beyond."

Chicago is one of the first cities to conduct such a comprehensive study of early childhood education, Daley said.

The study paints a dramatic picture of the at-risk children in Chicago's preschool programs. Forty percent are considered at high risk with three or more risk factors. Nearly half are English language learners. And, students come from families with an average income just over \$16,000 (the Federal Poverty Level is \$20,000 for a family of four).

"No other city has undertaken such sweeping research to examine the type of complex, multi-program system that exists in Chicago and other urban centers across the country," said Erikson Institute President Sam Meisels.

"By considering Head Start, Preschool for All and community collaboration programs simultaneously, this study breaks new ground by shifting the primary research focus from the level of a particular program to that of a larger system," he said.

Chicago Public Schools' Chief Officer of Early Childhood Education Barbara Bowman said the study will help CPS improve the programs in specific areas, including targeting an emphasis on mathematics.

Daley said he asked for a comprehensive study of early childhood education to make sure the City has a coordinated system in place that provides children with a strong, stimulating early education so they develop a love of learning at a young age and develop the skills they need to succeed in life.

“Nothing is more important to the economic future of Chicago than producing the well-educated workforce that’s necessary to compete in the global economy and bring well-paid jobs to our city,” he said.

“And make no mistake about it, the process of producing well-educated graduates begins long before the first day any child enters a school building. Learning begins at birth,” Daley said.

The study raises several areas for further analysis, including a finding that classroom quality and teacher characteristics are only inconsistently related to cognitive gains, while high levels of instructional support are more directly related to improvements in social-emotional development.

The study’s findings will be reviewed by an advisory team made up of experts in the field, who will make recommendations for Chicago preschool programs in the areas of program improvement, research and policy.

Daley thanked the City’s partners in the study: the McCormick Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, the Illinois State Board of Education and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

“We all agree that we need to do more in early childhood education, but overall, this study is a very encouraging assessment of the work that so many dedicated people are doing for our children and our city,” Daley said.

“We owe our children the best possible start in life. We can help assure that by giving every child access to education from a very young age,” he said.

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