

Study lauds effect of More at Four

News & Observer, BY LYNN BONNER - Staff writer

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More at Four, the state's preschool program for disadvantaged children, helps close the school achievement gap between poor and middle class students, according to research studies.

A report on the program's results was presented to the State Board of Education on Thursday, a few months before legislators begin to search in earnest for ways to pull out of a \$3.5 billion budget hole projected for next year.

Students who were enrolled in More at Four show the benefits years later, according to researchers from the FPG Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina. The former More at Four students scored higher on state standardized math and reading tests given at the end of third grade than did poor children who did not enroll in the program.

The state board reviewed a summary of years of research on the program that started enrolling children in January 2002.

The average reading and math scores for middle class children remain higher than poor children's averages. More at Four is worth a few points on standardized tests, helping boost student scores on math tests in 2007 and 2008 and closing the achievement gap by 31 percent, according to the study.

The achievement gap in reading scores closed 37 percent on the 2007 test and 24 percent on the 2008 test.

"The effect of More at Four was profound," said John Pruette, executive director of the state Office of Early Learning. "This is an effect that shows itself four years after the children have left the program."

More at Four enrolls nearly 30,800 children. The state does not maintain a waiting list, but counties have requested 1,200 more slots this year.

"It's pretty clear the advantage of having a preschool experience, particularly for those youngsters who are disadvantaged," Board of Education Chairman Bill Harrison said. "We need to find a way to serve as many youngsters as we can."

FPG research studies have been touting the benefits of More at Four for years, but the data have not earned the program immunity from budget cuts. The program has had its budget slashed a total of \$10 million during the last two years, and legislators have looked at ending duplication in the state's early childhood programs.

Democratic House members considered merging More at Four and Smart Start about two years ago, but only got as far as having them share some bureaucratic functions.

Republicans will control the state legislature next year and will be in charge of writing the budget. Republican leaders made clear before the election that they will scrutinize all programs for effectiveness.

Sen. Richard Stevens, a Wake County Republican who helped write the current budget, said it's premature to talk about any particular program.

"Everything will be looked at," he said. "It's too soon to know whether any program will be increased, decreased or stay the same."

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