

## CRITICS, BACKERS WANT BRIGHT BEGINNINGS STUDIED - DO RESULTS OF PRE-K PROGRAM JUSTIFY COST?

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School board members and other politicians are calling for more intense scrutiny of **Bright Beginnings**, Charlotte-Mecklenburg's renowned prekindergarten program.

Advocates and critics alike are seeking more proof that the literacy program designed to give struggling 4-year-olds a boost is getting the job done - and giving children tools to remain academically successful through elementary school.

Behind their concern is the performance of the first class - now third-graders - who fared more poorly on state tests than many expected.

Previous district studies had showed the program's graduates outpacing their peers who were eligible for **Bright Beginnings** but didn't participate. But on their first state tests, both groups had 69.5 percent of students performing at or above grade level.

This has generated requests for more proof of success to justify continued, and perhaps increased, funding for the program, which has cost nearly \$62 million since beginning in 1997. **Bright Beginnings**' new school year officially starts Aug. 29.

In addition to seeking more information about the district's earlier progress reports, school board members are asking questions like:

Did children have good teachers - not only in **Bright Beginnings** but in elementary school, too? How have they been taught? Did their elementary schools have all the books, technology and other resources they needed to turn out successful students?

The program's chances of maintaining broad political support may ride on the answers. **Bright Beginnings** has caught the attention of state lawmakers and education leaders in the Bush administration as politicians search for ways to boost the academic success of children who are at-risk of struggling in school.

Future funding also may be at stake. With Charlotte-Mecklenburg's budget growing tighter due to county and state cutbacks, district supporters of the program may face greater pressure to justify **Bright Beginnings**' expenses.

Wilhelmenia Rembert, the school board's vice chairperson, said she continues to be an advocate of the prekindergarten program.

"But at the same time, I think people, including those of us who support the program, need to be very concerned about monitoring the progress and making sure that the program justifies the resources we put behind it."

Board Chairperson Arthur Griffin said the prekindergarten effort should continue - but it should get a hard look first before it's expanded.

He expects Superintendent James Pughsley to provide more specific data, including the experience levels of teachers the children had in **Bright Beginnings** and their early elementary years.

"Who's in front of these kids?" Griffin asked.

"What schools did they attend? Those are the questions that we need to answer before we improve or change or modify the program. We need to get those answers quickly and not waste another school year."

Supporters point to aspects of the third-graders' performance as proof the program is working.

On state reading and math exams in May, students from the original Beginnings class were more likely to score in the highest-performance category than eligible kids who didn't participate.

And - in a statistic the district hadn't reported before - 162 of the 1,534 children, or nearly 11 percent, from the original **Bright Beginnings** class had to repeat kindergarten, first or second grade. But that compares to 81 of the 224 eligible kids not in the program, or 36 percent, according to Susan Agruso, assistant superintendent for testing.

Despite these mixed results, local supporters such as Howard Haworth, a Charlottean and former chairman of the N.C. Board of Education, are heartened by other figures provided by the district. One shows **Bright Beginnings** graduates from poor families who receive public assistance performed better than students from similar backgrounds not in the prekindergarten program.

It "may well be that we're on the cusp of breaking through with the best program in the state for uniquely challenged youngsters," Haworth said.

"I don't believe I would be too quick to scuttle that effort."

Mecklenburg County commissioners Chairman Parks Helms - whose board decides how much local money CMS gets - says **Bright Beginnings** should get the money to expand.

The program serves more than 3,000 students.

Helms said that should be upped by about a thousand, and "continue to evaluate the children to see what works and what doesn't."

Critics disagree - and instead suggest the program should shrink and improve its focus.

"There are at least 750 kids out there that need this kind of intervention, not 4,000 kids, and if we focus our resources on the 750, we'll probably see the impact we're looking for," said county commissioner Jim Puckett, a former school board member.

Puckett said CMS could use its new choice attendance plan to benefit **Bright Beginnings** graduates after they leave the program. Puckett said the district could establish an elementary school that specializes in working with **Bright Beginnings** graduates.

"What I would rather see is that the children stay together in an elementary school that's reflective of the needs of these kids," Puckett said.

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