

## **CMS finds success of pre-K hard to measure - As school board prepares to vote on \$10.4M cut Tuesday, Gorman says research is inconclusive.**

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Former school board member Louise Woods says Bright Beginnings is a proven success.

County commissioner Bill James says it's a proven failure.

They're looking at the same results.

Friday, Superintendent Peter Gorman told the school board they're both wrong.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools has spent a total of \$237 million on public prekindergarten since its debut 14 years ago. The first 4-year-olds are approaching high school graduation.

And Gorman says none of the research his predecessors did is solid enough to label the program a success or failure.

"At this time, there is not sufficient or valid evidence to support a funding decision on research from CMS," he said in a memo sent Friday evening.

On Tuesday, the school board is slated to vote on a \$10.4 million cost-cutting plan that abolishes more than 2,000 of the current 3,200 spots for 4-year-olds who lack basic kindergarten skills. CMS is among many districts and states considering cutbacks in public pre-K.

The pinch has reignited data wars over whether Bright Beginnings is worth the money. The reports that Gorman and Chief Accountability Officer Robert Avossa are now dismissing were done because of similar controversy several years ago.

Susan Agruso, who was CMS' chief researcher at the time and is now superintendent of Kings Park Central School District in New York, said Saturday that the district hired the Virginia-based Educational Research Service to review and analyze CMS data in 2003.

"We were looking for independent validation," she said. "We wanted someone to say 'You're not crazy,' because it was so controversial."

Those who want to protect Bright Beginnings say - accurately - that the program turns lagging 4-year-olds into well-prepared kindergartners.

Those who want to see CMS scale back say - also accurately - that the district has failed to deliver on early promises that pre-K would put disadvantaged kids on a path to long-term success.

As the first Bright Beginnings alums moved through elementary school, the gap between their performance and that of more advantaged students widened. CMS stopped tracking results years ago.

Gorman initially told the board he'd update information on the pioneering class's progress. Now he says it doesn't make sense to link pre-K experience to high school achievement: "It's just downright bad science to try to do that."

Instead, he says he supports Bright Beginnings on the basis of how well it prepares kindergartners. But with K-12 classrooms facing big cuts, he says he can't avoid pulling money out of pre-K.

Bright hopes

When Eric Smith became CMS superintendent in 1996, the nation was turning its attention to the gap

between the academic success of poor and minority students, and their white and middle-class peers.

Smith's plan for public pre-K drew state and national attention. Not only would CMS' 4-year-olds reap the benefits demonstrated in national preschool studies, he said, but the district would add a focus on reading skills. The goal: Put disadvantaged kids on an early track to success.

Some child care operators argued they could provide pre-K more efficiently. Smith countered that CMS could better control quality and monitor results.

By 1997, CMS was ready to take up to 2,000 4-year-olds. Screeners spread out to test children on their familiarity with books and language, their ability to recognize colors and shapes and other skills. The weakest would get the spots.

But only about 1,800 were screened, and they made up the first Bright Beginnings class, according to a 2003 report by CMS officials.

To monitor the effect of Bright Beginnings, CMS created a comparison group of 260 similar 4-year-olds.

When the children moved up to kindergarten in 1998, teachers rated all students on such skills as counting, language, colors and social interactions.

The results unleashed celebration and hope: Not only were the Bright Beginnings kids far better prepared than the comparison group, but they topped the average for all other CMS kindergartners.

That boded well for closing the achievement gap. The majority of Bright Beginnings kids were black or Hispanic and from low-income homes, while the "all other" group was dominated by middle-class and white children.

Moving up

The euphoria didn't last.

At the end of kindergarten, first and second grades, children took CMS reading and math tests. The Bright Beginnings kids quickly lost their edge over the general population, but continued to outperform the comparison group.

At the end of third grade, students took their first state exams.

That's when the real battle began.

In May 2002, 69.5 percent of Bright Beginnings third-graders passed their reading exams, exactly the same as the comparison group and well below the 84 percent pass rate for all other third-graders.

As school board members clamored for explanations, officials realized they had overlooked something. Children in the control group were more likely than Bright Beginnings alums to have been held back. When the kids who hadn't yet made it to third grade were factored in, Bright Beginnings kids leaped ahead of the comparison group by several percentage points.

For people like Woods, a board member at the time, that was vindication. Holding children back not only costs the taxpayers extra money but puts kids on a track that often leads to future failure and dropping out. If public pre-K was helping students get promoted, it was clearly making a difference.

Skeptics weren't swayed. The new tally may have nudged Bright Beginnings past the control group, but they were doing about the same as African-American and low-income kids who didn't get pre-K. The kids might be better off than they would have without Bright Beginnings, but they were no longer on track to close racial and income gaps.

The new CMS analysis released Friday says merging held-back students with test scores to create new results doesn't meet standards for valid research, even though the 2003 ERS report supported it. "We do not endorse this conclusion," Gorman's memo says.

#### Tough questions

As enrollment and costs grew, from just under \$10 million the first year to \$16.8 million in 2002-03, people began to question the program's price tag.

In 2004, CMS did a cost-benefit analysis. Officials concluded that the only immediate financial gains came from fewer students being held back, kindergarten teachers spending less time teaching social and literacy skills, and families saving on child care bills. Using that measure, they concluded, each dollar spent produced about 58 cents in concrete value.

The report quickly noted that many benefits couldn't be measured in money. And if officials used other preschool studies to predict that the kids would be less likely to land in jail or on welfare, then the benefit of each Bright Beginnings dollar rose to \$2.47.

As debate raged, tracking the kids got more complicated. By the end of third grade, about 500 of the original 1,800 Bright Beginnings class had left CMS. The comparison group had dwindled from 224 to 163.

Agruso said CMS intended to follow Bright Beginnings alumni throughout their academic careers. But when she and Smith left CMS, reports on the Bright Beginnings kids stopped.

#### Time for change?

By the time Gorman arrived in 2006, CMS was spending \$18 million a year on Bright Beginnings (it's up to \$21 million now). When the recession hit, some county commissioners and school board members pushed to cut pre-K money.

"It doesn't work. Kids in the program do no better than those not in the program," James, a Republican commissioner, said in a recent e-mail.

Gorman voiced support for Bright Beginnings. At first, he told the school board he'd find a way to revive studies of long-term progress. And last year he delayed the budget battle over pre-K by using federal stimulus money to pay the lion's share of Bright Beginnings.

Now, with the stimulus money ending, Gorman has proposed eliminating more than 60 percent of the Bright Beginnings spots. And because he can't vouch for previous CMS research, he's asking the board to decide "independent of 'research-based' results."

While public pre-K has become common nationwide, tracking results through middle and high school is rare. Long-range research is expensive and complicated.

"It's frustrating," says school board member Trent Merchant. "But from a standpoint of trying to be honest about what we can and cannot measure, I understand where Dr. Gorman is coming from."

#### Read the research

Because most Bright Beginnings research is several years old, little is available on the district website.

Read Superintendent Peter Gorman and Chief Accountability Officer Robert Avossa's analysis of prior CMS research: <http://obsyourschools.blogspot.com/>

**Mecklenburg ACTS** , a parents group, has posted the 2003 ERS summary of CMS research at its Web site: [www.mecklenburgacts.org/BB.pdf](http://www.mecklenburgacts.org/BB.pdf)

Part of the 2004 cost-benefit analysis is available at [www.cms.k12.nc.us](http://www.cms.k12.nc.us); click "Departments" at left, select Pre-K services, then click "documents."

Other pre-K information is available at the CMS site; click "Comprehensive Review" at left, then "Documents by topic," then scroll to "Pre-K Programs."

Bright Beginnings vote

The school board is scheduled to vote Tuesday on cutting \$10.4 million from Bright Beginnings in 2011-12.

The meeting starts at 6 p.m. at the Government Center, 600 E. Fourth St. Public comments on any subject will be heard; to speak, call 980-343-5139 by noon Tuesday or sign up on-site.

The meeting will air live on CMS-TV Cable 3 and will be webstreamed live. For the agenda and webstreaming link, go to [www.cms.k12.nc.us](http://www.cms.k12.nc.us) and click "Board of Education" at left.