

# Pre-K ruling still leaves many questions

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DURHAM -- The nonprofit that oversees Durham's More at Four pre-kindergarten program was heartened Monday by Superior Court Judge Howard Manning's ruling that the state cannot limit the program's enrollment -- but was also left with lots of questions.

"It's a groundbreaking ruling," said Durham's Partnership for Children spokeswoman Melanie Busbee. "It's great news. It says a lot about the role of early education -- all the facts that we've already known."

But after going over Manning's ruling in the education-opportunity lawsuit known as the Leandro case, Busbee and partnership Executive Director Laura Benson were left with too many questions to determine the ruling's local impact on the NC Pre-Kindergarten (NCPK) program, the replacement for More at Four.

The state budget that took effect July 1 eliminated More at Four, created the NCPK program, cut program funding by 20 percent and requires parents to contribute up to 10 percent of their income for their children to participate. Also, only one out of every five program slots would be set aside for at-risk children and fully funded by the state.

"At this point, we're told to continue as we were with NC Pre-K," Busbee said. "We don't assume it's going to go back to More at Four, but what the ruling seems to recognize is that More at Four shows evidence and More at Four helps at-risk children."

Manning said in his ruling Monday that the case "is not about numbers and slots" and instead is about the "rights of children."

"Each at-risk 4-year-old that appears at the doors of the NCPK program this fall is a defenseless, fragile child whose background of poverty or disability places the child at risk of subsequent academic failure," he wrote.

Partnership staff members are also unsure about some of the language in the ruling and are aware that with the issue in the hands of the legal system, it's "not going to be a quick process," Busbee said. "We assume it will be positive, and that's hopeful for us."

Benson said in an emailed statement that there's no doubt in her mind that Durham's child care professionals and community members will pull together to provide "high-quality" early-childhood education for youngsters, no matter the result of the ruling.

The hard part, she suggested, is forging forward with "challenging time constraints and a significant paradigm shift." More at Four operated under the Department of Public Instruction, while NC Pre-K falls under the oversight of the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services.

"We are balancing a much smaller budget with an anticipated reduction in the breadth of educational services for these preschoolers," Benson said.

The North Carolina Justice Center applauded Manning's ruling in a statement Monday.

"Judge Manning's order demonstrates that North Carolina's at-risk preschoolers are more than just lines in a ledger sheet," stated N.C. Education and Law Project Director Chris Hill. "They deserve better than harsh cuts and an uncertain future."

Busbee said the importance of early-childhood education programs can't be underscored enough.

"There are children out there who are not having opportunities for any early education and care, so this is giving them the jump-start that they otherwise would not have been afforded," she said. "We feel like Pre-K is vital for all children, and there are some children who just aren't getting that experience. It helps them get equal starting ground for entrance into kindergarten."