

State may cut childhood education program

Faces of poverty: Raleigh

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RALEIGH

Thomas Parker recites the alphabet with his classmates every day in his More at Four classroom at the Triangle Day Care Center in Durham.

While the 4-year-old, known as T.J., is prepping for kindergarten, his mother, Brittany Purdie, is worried that her 3-year-old daughter, Talia, might not get the same opportunity if state legislators decide to cut the More at Four program.

"I really want Talia in the program because of how much it has helped T.J.," Purdie said. More at Four is a pre-kindergarten program that prepares low-income 4-year-olds for elementary school, said John Prewitt, the executive director of More at Four. For children from a family of four to qualify for the program, the family must earn less than about \$43,000, Prewitt said.

"It is a carefully constructed intervention for at-risk population of 4-year-old students," Prewitt said. "The majority of children in the program have never been in childcare."

Early childhood and the state budget

This year, the program received about \$160 million in funding and served 30,000 children. In her budget proposal, Gov. Bev Perdue recommended cutting the program by 5 percent next year. The N.C. House and Senate have also proposed cutting the program. Such cuts would reduce the number of children the program can serve, Prewitt said.

Kara Turner, owner of Primary Colors Childcare Center in Durham, has 33 students enrolled in More at Four classrooms.

She said that if the program is cut, it would have a devastating effect on her center because the program is a major source of income.

Much of the More at Four money goes towards teacher salaries, benefits and the curriculum, she said.

"If they cut any funds, then we can't afford those teachers anymore," Turner said. "And if we can't afford those teachers, then we don't meet the requirements to properly run a center."

Renita Harvey, one of the two More at Four teachers at T.J.'s school, said the program is beneficial to students.

“We’ve had kids that didn’t even know what puzzles and crayons were,” Harvey said. “The program gives the kids that extra boost, so that when they go to kindergarten, they are on the right track as the other kids and don’t fall behind.”

Prewitt said the program focuses on fundamental academics, cognitive, social and emotional development, as well as physical health.

View from the classroom

If the More at Four program is cut, Purdie will be unable to afford childcare for Talia. Purdie, whose children qualify for the program because she is a 22-year-old single mother with low income, starts her days at 6:30 a.m. when she gets herself and her children up and ready for school.

They arrive at school between 7:30 and 8 a.m., earlier than most, because she has to get to work early. After her shift is over at 5 p.m., she picks up the children from school, and from there, they go home to eat dinner, read books and go to sleep.

“I’ve definitely seen a difference in T.J. since he has been in the program,” Purdie said. She said the program has provided counselors who help with her son’s speech problems.

In Harvey’s class last year, there were 18 children, 11 of whom spoke English as their second language. She said that in the beginning of the year, many of the students were scared to be in a different environment and lacked many social skills. Over time, she said, she and the other classroom teacher were able to get these children ready for kindergarten.

“If you have five kids that don’t speak English, they aren’t going to get the attention they need and deserve to be able to learn like the rest of the kids,” Harvey said. “We help the kids so they won’t have to face this problem.”

She said that in a More at Four classrooms, there are nine students per teacher. A regular kindergarten class is allowed to have 25 children per teacher.

“Significant gains are made in the pre-kindergarten year and continues through kindergarten,” Prewitt said. “Children that don’t go through the program have a less chance of being successful in school.”

At playtime in his classroom, T.J. and his friends are constructing an imaginary house with building blocks.

Harvey said that at the beginning of the school year, many of the children weren’t used to the routine of school and lacked social skills. Some didn’t know what a puzzle was. “When I see an improvement and change in these things, it’s a great feeling,” she said.