

Will budget cuts put early learning at risk?

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BETHLEHEM -- Jared Marsh taught addition and experimentation through making oatmeal raisin cookies as a group of 3-year-olds jostled to get their fingers in the dough.

It wasn't just a baking lesson. It was a science experiment, an exploration of what happens when a group of different things are combined to make something new. The children, without even thinking about it, were learning how to share and how to take turns.

"They're little sponges; they're developing and they're curious," said Marsh, a head teacher at Bethlehem Preschool. "It is the best time to expose them to these ideas and concepts and building blocks they'll use as they grow."

Early learning is increasingly viewed as the key to academic success in later life, particularly for economically disadvantaged students up to age 6 who frequently begin school behind their peers. Most of the state's 1.5 million children younger than 6 who are cared for outside the home are in private programs. In the past decade, the state has rapidly expanded its funding for early learning programs in public school districts.

But education advocates are warning that any expansion or even maintenance of existing programs is at risk now that Gov. Andrew Cuomo is expected to chop at least a billion dollars of school aid out of next year's state budget. That can have dire consequences later, advocates warn, because studies show that 90 percent of brain development happens in the first five years of life.

About 450 of the state's 700 school districts now participate in prekindergarten programs, but the funding freeze has meant that no others can join. Most of the children served in the public programs are from low-income or working class neighborhoods, according to Winning Beginning NY, a statewide coalition of early learning groups.

The state's \$1.4 billion reduction in school aid last year is expected to be matched or eclipsed in Cuomo's proposed budget. That means early education advocates will be left fighting for ever-dwindling resources with representatives from every other piece of the education pipeline.

State lawmakers passed universal prekindergarten legislation in 1997, which provided programs for 4-year-olds in the public districts. Since that time, the state's investment has grown to \$414 million. Prekindergarten programs now serve 100,000 children, including hundreds of students in the Albany and Schenectady districts, the only local schools to offer full-day programs. Another 120,000 4-year-olds are waiting for seats, according to Winning Beginning NY.

"We need to make the investment in early education because we will continue to play catch-up if we don't," said Marsha Basloe, executive director of Early Care and Learning, a network of child care resource and referral agencies.

A primary issue is that the state lacks the ability to assess program quality and student progress, which makes it easier to expand and support effective programs, Basloe said. A group of early education advocates from across the state is calling on Cuomo to support early learning programs so that more New York students begin school ready to learn. They are also promoting QUALITYstarsNY, a rating system in use in 13 counties across New York that centralizes regulation of programs and helps parents determine the best program for their children. It also offers support to improve their ratings.

Thirty states already offer a single standard measure for all programs, so New York is late to the game. There are 1.5 million children under age 6 in New York cared for by an outside provider in private and public programs, said Patricia Skinner, executive director of the Capital District Child Care Council.

She said cuts to early childhood will mean higher costs later in the form of remedial education, health care, welfare, unemployment and incarceration.