

Early Start: Program aims to prepare kids for kindergarten

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NORWALK -- City schools are preparing for a six-week summer program for incoming kindergartners who have had little or no prekindergarten.

"Brighter Futures," a collaboration of the school district, Norwalk Community College and the Norwalk Children's Foundation, will serve 120 students.

The classes should help the children feel more comfortable in the classroom when they enter kindergarten in the fall, said Mary Budrawich, the district's early childhood specialist. Students who haven't had any structured preschool experience can be at a significant disadvantage when they enter kindergarten, she said.

"I guess lots of people don't see it this way, but I think kindergarten is absolutely the most important grade in all of the school years because kindergarten sets a tone for children," Budrawich said. "I really think this is a phenomenal opportunity for the children to have a better chance at having a successful kindergarten experience."

The program will cost about \$200,000 and is being funded through grants. The Norwalk Children's Foundation, an advocacy group for at-risk children, is giving the school district \$100,000.

The Norwalk Children's Foundation ran a similar program at Norwalk Community College last year for 22 students from Head Start programs, said Anthony Allison, the foundation's program officer.

"If they come into kindergarten with children who have had quality preschool education right off the bat, then they're already behind developmentally," he said. "This is a pivotal time period."

Students in the NCC program last summer received positive feedback from their kindergarten teachers this past school year, said the Rev. James Carter, the foundation's executive director.

"The results we got from the kindergarten teachers who had our kids last year was that they just did incredibly well compared to kids who hadn't had that experience," he said.

Administrators at the city's 12 elementary schools recommended incoming students for this summer's program based on their education history and background, Budrawich said.

The daily three-hour classes will start July 5 at Marvin and Rowayton elementary schools and Norwalk Community College. Students will be divided into groups of 12 students, each taught by a certified kindergarten teacher and a paraprofessional.

In addition, the program will have two school social workers, two speech pathologists, English as a second language teachers, a school psychologist and a school nurse.

The curriculum will focus on early language and literacy skills. Teachers will review one book per week with students, helping to expand their vocabulary and making reading familiar, said Jen Wood, the director of the Child Development Laboratory School at the college, who helped develop the curriculum.

"They are going to get a range of cognitive, social and physical activities all around that book," she said.

The program also aims to get students to feel comfortable with groups of their peers and around teachers, Wood said. They will be taken on several field trips to places like the Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Stepping Stones Museum for Children.

There will be three training sessions for parents with children in the program to teach them how to support their kids in school.

"When children are very young, you want to target the parents just as much as the child," Budrawich said. "We also want the parents to have a positive experience with school."

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