

A Preschool Where Kids Get a Leg Up

Successful Curiosity Corner preschool curriculum drives results and confidence—so much that ESL kids use "deciduous" in a sentence.

By Stephanie Czekalinski Published: Dec. 6, 2013

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HYATTSVILLE, Md.—Two little boys sit coloring at a cluster of desks in the center of the classroom, oblivious to the tumult around them. In one corner of the room, a clutch of 3- and 4-year-olds is pretending to host a fall festival. Another group plays house. No one in this class of 20 preschoolers is in an assigned seat. The children are engrossed in their own conversations.

And those conversations are the point. Parents, teachers, school administrators, and educational-policy experts are counting on the chatter to help students at Langley Park-McCormick Elementary School in this working-class suburb of Washington develop the language, cognitive, and social skills they'll need to succeed in school.

This cheerful classroom is on the front lines of the battle to close the achievement gap between poor students and their more-affluent peers. More than four-fifths of Langley Park's students are Hispanic—many are immigrants or children of immigrants—and more than 95 percent qualify for federal funding that targets children of low-income families.

For the past two years, in its preschool and Head Start classes, the school has used a curriculum called Curiosity Corner that stresses skills with oral language and gives children time to practice them through songs, stories, and structured play. Developed by the Baltimore-based Success for All Foundation, which has produced educational programs for 30 years, this preschool curriculum is used in more than 300 schools nationwide.

The teacher, veteran Monica Wright, believes the program works. She has heard students use words such as "unique" and "deciduous"—learned in their lessons—in conversation.

"The biggest difference we've seen is communication," said Gerri Toure, a reading specialist at Langley Park. Before, "kids didn't participate [in classroom discussions] because of apprehension—academic or otherwise." Now, they do.

She points to the "think, pair, share" technique. When prompted by a teacher's question, the students are encouraged to think about their response and then find a partner to share their answer before telling the class. "It gives all the kids a chance to talk—not just the one who answers," Toure said. "It gives them a chance to formulate questions and adjust the sentence before they have to say it in front of everyone."

This anecdotal experience is backed by empirical evidence. Children who attended Curiosity Corner preschools tested significantly higher on literacy by the end of kindergarten than children who received normal instruction, according to a 2010 review of research funded by the CfBT Education Trust, a British nonprofit that studies educational programs worldwide.

These findings, the review noted, should be taken cautiously. When researchers tracked students who participated in preschool in the 1960s and 1970s, they found that the effects wore off after a few

years. Still, that doesn't necessarily negate the positive results, said Nancy A. Madden, Success for All's president. These programs give children the chance to perform at grade level in later years instead of starting behind in kindergarten and lagging further over the course of their schooling.

If you want to close the achievement gap, you need to start in preschool, Madden said. "Kids who have preschool—they just have a leg up."