Head Start benefits slim, audit reveals

BY DOUG MYERS
Capitol news bureau

Children who participate in the federally funded Head Start program are only “slightly better” prepared for kindergarten than those who apply but never get in, Legislative Auditor Dan Kyle said Tuesday.

“arere’s not a big difference,” he said.

Kyle released an 8-page report Tuesday showing scores on three of the four kindergarten assessment tests for former Head Start students were only slightly better than the scores of children who applied but didn’t get into the programs.

And in one of the assessments used to judge mathematics and pre-reading skills, students on Head Start’s “waiting list” actually fared better than students who participated in the program.

Kyle’s office examined the assessment scores of students taken at the beginning of the 1998-99 school year in 12 Louisiana parishes. The study included the test scores of students who attended Baton Rouge’s Head Start program, which is run by the city-parish government.

It was one of four audits released Tuesday by the legislative auditor.

Kyle said his office embarked on the study after lawmakers questioned whether there is any benefit from the dollars spent on Head Start.

Some lawmakers have questioned whether Head Start and some other government-funded preschool programs are anything more than baby-sitting services.

“We’re just trying to assess how well these kids are performing,” said Sen. Tom Greene, chairman of the Senate Education Committee.

Greene, R-Marrero, said the Senate Education and Finance committees will meet next week to discuss Kyle’s findings.

“We’ve got a lot of work ahead,” Greene said.

Greene said he especially wants to look at how much is spent per child.

In one case, Kyle’s audit found he agency running a Head Start program in New Orleans is spending $7,602 per child on its program, almost $2,700 per child more than any of the other Head Start programs reviewed.

That figure is also roughly $2,600 more than the average public school in the state spends on pupils.

That program is run by the Total Community Action Agency in New Orleans, the audit shows.

“That’s a taxpayer rip-off if that’s the case,” Greene said.

Kyle said federal officials opened records to his auditors, but he said they had a “lot of questions” about why the state was looking into a federal matter.

Head Start is a federal program administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.

Forty-five different grantees around Louisiana, including 11 school boards, receive funding to run Head Start classes. The other 34 classes are run by “community action” agencies, local municipalities or nonprofit agencies.

East Baton Rouge’s Head Start program is run by the city-parish government.


Kyle’s report does not detail findings about each of the grantees, but instead draws an overall picture of how Head Start works.

“Head Start does not require grantees to apply common educational goals to all students,” Kyle’s office said, adding that Head Start generally uses structured play as its main teaching method.

Kyle’s report also includes a survey of 46 kindergarten teachers in 12 parishes throughout the state, seeking opinions on how well-prepared Head Start children are to enter school.

Here’s some of the findings:

• About 52 percent of the teachers said Head Start children displayed “low levels of preparedness” or only “moderate preparedness.”

• About 39 percent of those teachers said Head Start children generally knew their “basic” colors and shapes.

• About 63 percent of the teachers said Head Start children were generally familiar with the alphabet and 61 percent said they were generally familiar with numbers.

The teachers also said more emphasis should be placed on academics in Head Start programs, and there should be better coordination and communication with local public schools.

In a statement, state Superintendent of Education Cecil Picard said the Louisiana Department of Education has no jurisdiction or authority over Head Start.

“I feel that if the department had oversight, the program would address some of the major recommendations of kindergarten teachers as cited in the report, including more emphasis on communication and coordination with the public schools and more emphasis on academics,” Picard said.