Test results reveal benefits of state's preschool program

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LAFAYETTE — Lafayette's 4-year-olds showed dramatic improvement after participating in the LA4 preschool program, test scores released Friday showed.

The state's LA4 Early Childhood Program is aimed at preparing 4-year-olds for school by teaching them to move, speak, behave and function in the classroom. The lessons to teach them those skills also are designed to aid in their cognitive and physical development.

Lafayette is one of 17 parishes and two city systems that participate in the voluntary program, which is funded with state and federal dollars. Students who qualify for free or reduced lunch can attend free, and they make up about 90 percent of the 5,000 Louisiana 4-year-olds in the program. Students who do not qualify can attend for a small tuition fee.

Students in the LA4 program were tested at the start of the 2002-03 school year and again after they had completed the school year.

Lafayette students' mastery of math and English-related concepts and skills grew dramatically, as did their grasp of life skills, the test scores show.

Before the school year began, about 20 percent of the students had grasped the math concepts and skills tested. At the end of the year, that number was 90 percent.

At the start of the year, language-related skill mastery was at 12 percent; at the end of the year, it was 83 percent.

Students' mastery of print-related skills rose from 12 percent to 82 percent.

The life skills mastery was similar: At the start of the year, 24 percent of the students used the skills correctly often; at the end of the year, that percentage had risen to 76 percent.

Superintendent James Easton said he is "not at all surprised, but very happy" with the numbers.

"Clearly, we know the difference between students who are successful and those who are not successful are their experiences prior to coming to school," Easton said. "We say it all the time. That's it. So to provide those youngest with preschool experience would have to have dramatic results."

It is preschool that will make the most difference in Louisiana's education, Easton said.

"I think that as preschool experiences become universal in our state, I think it will revolutionize the state for the better," Easton said. "As an outgrowth of that, you will see student achievement soar, and it has implications for life: This program will better those kids for life, because it gives them successors to build on."

The cause of the achievement gap between lower socio-economic classes and higher ones is not a mystery, Easton said.

"If you want to talk in layman's terms, the difference between poor kids and middle-class kids is experiences. Those preschool experiences are vital to build on; they are the experiences that you add on to," Easton said.

"When those middle-class kids come to school, they have cognitive development ahead of the poor kids, because they have more experiences. This transcends race and all that other stuff; it all translates into experiences."

Easton said Lafayette's success is in large part attributable to two women: Ouida Forsyth and Joan Daley.

Forsyth is the supervisor of the LA4 program, and Daley is principal of Truman Montessori School, the state's only completely LA4 campus.

"In our parish, we have the Ouidas and the Joans, and they're above and beyond," he said. "This is their passion; we have outstanding leadership in that area."

Forsyth said there are several reasons the program is working so well:

• The curriculum is based on research into early childhood development;

• There is a 10-to-1 student-to-teacher ratio, with a certified teacher and a teacher assistant in every class;

• Teachers must meet rigorous state standards in their instruction; and

• The program coordinates its efforts with other agencies to avoid duplication in the areas of health and social development.