

Martinsville Press

Kizner, others: Don't cut pre-kindergarten



Martinsville School Superintendent Scott Kizner (left) and John Morgan (at podium), executive director of Voices for Virginia's Children, commented Tuesday on a report on preschool programs. They spoke at the Capitol in Richmond. (AP)

Wednesday, March 3, 2010

By ASSOCIATED PRESS -

RICHMOND — Teachers, child-advocacy groups and other supporters of Virginia's preschool program for low-income pupils are urging legislators not to cut funding for what they consider a crucial investment in children's educational and economic future.

Martinsville Schools Superintendent Scott Kizner was among those in Richmond on Tuesday to urge lawmakers not to cut funding for the Virginia Preschool initiative.

Advocates argued that the House of Delegates' budget would improperly slice millions in funding for the VPI and other programs for at-risk children —

despite studies that show that such programs are effective in getting children ready for kindergarten and raising their achievement to that of their peers from less disadvantaged homes.

They also noted that the Senate and Gov. Bob McDonnell, who signaled support for “a world-class education from preschool to college” in his inaugural address, recommended no cuts to pre-kindergarten programs, and urged the House to restore funding.

Providing early childhood programs such as preschool will pay long-term dividends to the public and private sectors in many ways, said Rob Bradham of the Greater Richmond Chamber of Commerce. Perhaps most important, he said, is increasing children's potential to earn higher wages in adulthood and become being tax-paying, productive citizens.

“Workforce development and economic development begins at birth,” Bradham said at a news conference. Because so much of the brain develops before age 5, it's important to invest early in children to make sure they live a productive life rather than be a drain on public resources, he said.

Angela Ciolfi, an attorney with the JustChildren program of the Legal Aid Justice Center, said that the House budget would bundle state money for preschool, early-reading programs and supplements to local school districts for at-risk children into one fund, and cut \$50 million from it. It also would convert funding to a block-grant method based on a school division's total student population rather than on the number of low-income children. The change would favor high-population districts, regardless of need.

“The slicing and dicing results in a massive reallocation of resources designed to support at-risk students from high-poverty, mostly urban school divisions, to low-poverty, mostly suburban ones,” Ciolfi said. Such changes would put several school divisions at risk of having to eliminate all or most of their VPI slots. Richmond, Norfolk, Petersburg, Portsmouth and Roanoke are among those that would lose millions in state money over the next biennium under the block-grant funding change.

The proposed cuts come at a time when the Southern states lag behind the rest of the nation in all other education indicators besides providing pre-K services for 3- and 4-year-olds, according to a report released Tuesday by the Southern Education Foundation.

“It makes no sense, no matter how severe the economic crisis faced by Southern state and local governments, to make damaging reductions in the availability of quality pre-K for children,” Lynn Huntley, the foundation’s president, said in the report.

Therese Warner, a VPI teacher in Rockingham County, said many at-risk children come from families that can’t afford private preschool. Without VPI, she said, they wouldn’t be able to develop the academic and social skills that many other students do before starting kindergarten.

In the Rockingham-Harrisonburg area, for example, many of the preschool students come from immigrant families, and the program helps them start learning English.

The initiative also requires liaisons to work with pupils’ families and visit their homes. Warner said she has found that many of the children come from poor, often single-parent backgrounds where their mothers and fathers sometimes are teenagers, high-school dropouts, or both.

“They don’t have time to teach their kids,” Warner said. “They’re just surviving, many of them.”

Julie McConnell, an assistant prosecutor in Richmond Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court, said that such programs reduce the risk that today’s children become violent adults and asked legislators to support early-childhood education as a key tool in reducing Virginia’s crime rate. She cited studies that show a correlation between high-quality preschool and a reduction in juvenile delinquency. “We will pay a much higher price later when our delinquency rates soar,” she said.

Del. Kenneth Plum, D-Fairfax, argued on the House floor for restoration of pre-K funding.

It would be “penny-wise and pound-foolish to think about cutting preschool education,” Plum said, adding that early spending on children will yield high returns and save the state money in social welfare and prison costs.

But Del. Kirk Cox, R-Colonial Heights and a member of the legislative panel working to finalize the budget, said the state has more than doubled funding for the pre-K program in recent years.

“It’s not a core function of education,” he said. “Every dollar you put into pre-K is a dollar you take out of the classroom