

Advocates tout early childhood education gains

They say funding should be priority

By Eric Jankiewicz Eagle Staff Writer

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State Rep. Aaron Bernstine, R-10th, visits with students in Julia Williamson's class at Slippery Rock University's preschool program on Monday.

ERIC JANKIEWICZ/BUTLER EAGLE

SLIPPERY ROCK — To get more money for Pre-K education and enroll more kids in those programs, advocates are getting more politicians in the schools to see first hand the benefits of early childhood development.

On Monday Julia Williamson watched state Rep. Aaron Bernstine, R-10th, read a children's book to her class made up of 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds. In her 12 years as an early childhood educator for Slippery Rock University, she remembers a time when preschool didn't get much consideration — or funding.

Along with Bernstine, state Sen. Elder Vogel, R-47th, and Butler County Commissioner Leslie Osche met on Monday with education specialists and early childhood education advocates at SRU. The group met to mark the inclusion of \$25 million for pre-kindergarten funding in the state's 2018-19 budget.

They started the day with a roundtable discussion focused on Bernstine's and Vogel's districts.

In Bernstine's district, which includes Slippery Rock Borough and township, the advocacy group Pre-K for PA determined that 30 additional classrooms were needed to educate 592 eligible children who currently do not have access to the kind of classrooms provided at SRU.

Vogel's district, which includes Muddy Creek, Lancaster, and Jackson townships, has 1,609 children who don't have access and an additional 80 pre-K classrooms would be needed to fill the gap.

SRU's preschool and child care center has 104 students currently enrolled. The students come from 10 different school districts across Butler, Mercer and Lawrence counties.

"When we started this push (in early 2000s) for early education there was no investment," said Julie Thumma, Butler County's early care and education specialist for Lifesteps, a nonprofit group focused on family development. "We've seen a lot of progress and investment recently (for education) from birth to third grade,"

While early education advocates welcome the increased funding, the ultimate goal is to get hundreds of millions in government investment for early education, with advocacy groups like Pre-K for PA aiming to get \$282 million in the state budget.

They argue that increased funding will ultimately lead to savings later. That will come through a healthier civic population and reducing the number of students repeating grades

and increasing high school graduation rates, which will ultimately lower incarceration and crime rates.

Drawing from research and surveys of jail populations across the state, researchers have found that students who have trouble in school and those who drop out are more likely to turn to crime.

“We are hopeful, given the momentum. But we’d love to see (higher funding),” said Lissa Geiger Shulman, the public policy director for Trying Together, a Pittsburgh-based education advocacy group. “We’re continuing to work with legislators through things like today’s event and we hope they realize the value of that.”

In Butler County, advocates like Shulman and Thumma point out that high-quality, publicly funded Pre-K is still limited. Having children as young as 3 in a productive, structured setting, they argue, is important for brain development and will often help set a positive tone for the rest of that student’s learning career.

Williamson agrees.

“Preschool is very important. They learn a lot of social skills and precursor skills,” she said. “And in kindergarten you can immediately tell the difference between kids who went (to Pre-K) and those who didn’t.”

A typical day for Williamson’s students includes various social activities, reading time and, weather permitting, outdoor activities.

Advocates like Shulman say that while finding the money for Pre-K programs might seem difficult, it should be among the state’s top priorities.

“We know there are some needed conversations in Harrisburg to discuss finding revenue streams,” Shulman said. “Brain research shows that those early years are incredibly formative years in brain development.”

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