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December 12, 2006

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Legislative Education Study Committee

**FR:** David Harrell

**RE: STAFF BRIEF: KINDERGARTEN PLUS EVALUATION REPORT**

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The workplan for the Legislative Education Study Committee (LESC) for the 2006 interim includes a report on the Kindergarten Plus Pilot Project.

**Issues:**

The 2003 Legislature enacted Kindergarten Plus as a three-year pilot project to be conducted in "high-poverty schools" in four school districts – Albuquerque Public Schools, Gallup-McKinley County Public Schools, Gadsden Independent Schools, and Las Cruces Public Schools – to study the efficacy of extended kindergarten for disadvantaged students. The purpose of the original pilot project was to demonstrate that increased time in kindergarten narrows the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and other students and that it increases cognitive skills and leads to higher tests scores for all participants.

With the initial three-year pilot project period coming to an end, the 2006 Legislature amended the Kindergarten Plus statute (Laws 2006, Chapter 57):

- to extend the pilot project for six years;
- to allow the four original pilot school districts to expand their programs by adding additional classes or schools or both; and
- to allow any other school district with high-poverty schools to apply for Kindergarten Plus funding.

To support the extension and expansion of the project, the 2006 Legislature appropriated \$1.0 million from the General Fund to the Public Education Department (PED).

The 2006 Legislature also made several adjustments in the terms of the project. These amendments:

- extend the kindergarten year by “up to” four months and “at least” 40 instructional days, thereby resolving a discrepancy in the original statute, which, in one place, had extended the year by four months exactly and, in another, by 40 instructional days exactly;
- strike “numeracy and cognitive and social skills” from the skills to be measured through standardized assessments in kindergarten and in first grade, so that only the students’ progress in literacy must be measured; and
- add a requirement that educational assistants be paid at the same rate and under the same terms as educational assistants in regular full-day kindergarten programs. (On this point, the 2003 language had required only that the teachers in Kindergarten Plus be paid at the same rate and under the same terms as teachers in regular full-day kindergarten programs.)

Still in the statute are the requirements that PED establish reporting and evaluation requirements for participating schools and provide interim and final reports each year to the Legislature and to the Governor on the efficacy of the pilot project.

In April 2006, PED issued a Request for Applications (RFA) inviting school districts to apply for funds to operate a Kindergarten Plus Pilot Project through the end of the six-year study in 2009, with an application deadline of May 19, 2006. The RFA notes that the cost of the program will be approximately \$25,000 per class or school and that districts should develop their application budgets accordingly.

Three new school districts and one school applied to PED to establish new Kindergarten Plus programs; and all of the original four districts applied to expand their programs. The department has approved the three new district applications but rejected the school application – from Jefferson Montessori Academy, a charter school in Carlsbad Municipal Schools – because it did not meet the eligibility requirement of at least 85 percent of its students on the free and reduced-fee lunch program. From the four original districts, the department approved a total of 10 new schools and five new classes in schools with existing programs. Altogether, then, for school year 2006-2007, 29 Kindergarten Plus classes in seven school districts are serving approximately 962 students.

Finally, PED contracted with the Office of Education Accountability (OEA) to evaluate the first two years of the program, and PED has evaluated the third year.

## **Background:**

The presentation on Kindergarten Plus during the 2005 interim included findings from the OEA evaluations of the project.

- Among other findings from the year one evaluation, OEA reported that:
  - teachers and administrators alike saw improved social skills among students and higher levels of parental involvement as a result of the Kindergarten Plus Pilot Project;
  - attendance declined at the end of the kindergarten year, in part because of family vacations; and
  - time spent in the program prior to the beginning of kindergarten proved the most valuable.
- Although the year two evaluation was incomplete at the time of the presentation during the 2005 interim, OEA noted preliminary indications that Kindergarten Plus was continuing to be an important method of helping kindergarten students prepare for first grade and that many teachers had expressed interest in expanding the program.
- The completed year two evaluation by OEA, published in July 2006, found that, overall, “results for Kindergarten Plus students continue to be positive.”
  - More specifically, the report documents consistent decreases in the numbers of students classified in the highest risk categories for future difficulties with literacy, as measured by the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Literacy Skills (DIBELS).
  - There was more variety, however, in the observations from OEA site visits to each program. As the report states, “[t]hese visits provided insight into the ways districts implemented the program, as well as gathered key information about how Kindergarten Plus teachers and administrators felt about the program.” For example:
    - because the schedule implemented by Albuquerque Public Schools provided only nine days off between school years, teachers and administrators alike expressed concern about the possibility of exhausting the teachers;
    - Gadsden Independent Schools, which implemented pre-kindergarten rather than Kindergarten Plus, reduced the enrollment in each of its sections from 20 to 16 to allow each student more individualized attention but found that the different requirements and schedules of New Mexico PreK and Kindergarten Plus created some confusion among parents and school officials;

- Gallup McKinley County Public Schools experienced some difficulties with recruitment and attendance; and, given the different beginning and ending times and the differing curricula among the four programs in the district, teachers and administrators questioned the validity of any conclusions drawn from the evaluation; and
  - Las Cruces Public Schools, with one site, began first grade 20 days earlier for participating students rather than extend the end of the kindergarten year, a change that seemed to mitigate the problem of poor year's end attendance noted in the OEA evaluation of year one.
- Finally, among the conclusions and lessons learned, the OEA report notes that:
- despite some local variations, student performance continues to be positive; and
  - “program flexibility is a double-edged sword”: while it allows districts to meet local needs, “it stymies efforts to evaluate program quality across the pilot districts.”

Similar broad themes appear in the PED evaluation of year three of the program: “Data from the DIBELS assessment . . . continue to demonstrate positive results, and teachers and administrators continue to view the program as an effective way to ensure that students are prepared for Kindergarten and first grade.” Furthermore, the PED evaluation found that, in every school, more Kindergarten Plus students reached benchmarks than their counterparts who did not participate in Kindergarten Plus.

For the first year of the pilot project, school year 2003-2004, the Legislature appropriated \$100,000, which PED supplemented with an additional \$300,000 from the federal Reading First funds so that each of the four districts could receive an appropriation of \$100,000. That same arrangement prevailed for the second year, school year 2004-2005; but for the third, school year 2005-2006, the Legislature appropriated the full \$400,000 because PED had indicated that Reading First funds could no longer be used for that purpose.

The concept for Kindergarten Plus originated with the late Sandra Feldman, former president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). In a speech to the AFT convention in July 2002, Ms. Feldman called on the federal government “to help states and districts to provide disadvantaged children with the opportunity to start kindergarten during the summer months BEFORE they would ordinarily enter, and then to stay on through the summer BEFORE they will enter first grade.”

New Mexico seems to have been the first jurisdiction to implement Kindergarten Plus. Interest has been reported in other states, however, and a bill has been pending in Congress since July 2004.

**Presenters:**

Dr. Catherine Cross Maple, Deputy Secretary, Learning and Accountability, PED; and Dr. Lana Paolillo, Bureau Chief, Early Childhood Education Bureau, PED, will discuss the expansion and evaluation of the Kindergarten Plus Pilot Project.

**Questions the committee may wish to consider:**

1. Through how many grades will the progress of Kindergarten Plus students be tracked?
2. How many schools are eligible for Kindergarten Plus but have not implemented the program?
3. What has been the parental response to Kindergarten Plus?
4. Have the sample sizes in the Kindergarten Plus classrooms been large enough to produce valid data and reliable conclusions?
5. To what extent, if any, should PED require more uniformity among the programs in the various districts?
6. To what extent is Kindergarten Plus being used as a model for programs offered through New Mexico PreK?
7. In what other ways, if any, might Kindergarten Plus and New Mexico PreK be coordinated or aligned?
8. How many students have participated in both programs? What efforts have been made to track their progress into elementary school?