

Alaska prekindergarten project gets high marks

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An experimental prekindergarten project has produced good results, shining a light on a need for more attention to developmental education, education specialists told state lawmakers.

The education department delivered a report this week on the pilot project that focuses on Alaska Native households at or below the poverty level in six regions of the state, the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner reported. The pupils were 4-year-olds and some 5-year-olds.

Program director Cyndy Curran said more than 70 percent of the 345 students improved their vocabulary levels as expected or performed better during the first year.

But vocabulary tests suggested almost three-quarters of those students entered the pilot program lagging behind their peers nationally, the department said.

The program, which costs \$2 million annually, is in its second year.

Gov. Sean Parnell's proposed budget included another \$2 million to continue the program, Curran told the House Finance Committee's education subcommittee on Thursday.

Rep. Tammie Wilson, a North Pole Republican who is chairwoman of the subcommittee, asked Curran's office for more information to help lawmakers weigh the project's performance. She said the department estimated a statewide prekindergarten program, similar in function to the pilot project, would cost \$130 million.

"Those are big numbers," she said.

The newspaper reported that in the Yukon-Koyukuk district, the project opened new preschool classrooms in Minto, where administrators worked closely with the Tanana Chiefs Conference Head Start program, and Allakaket, where teachers incorporated Athabaskan language immersion into programming.