

Kids report shows progress, problems

Pre-kindergarten enrollment in Rochester up; college and career readiness down

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In one part of the room was a tabletop sandbox with toys. A few feet away, a fish tank filled with suds. Behind it, 4-year-olds mixing yellow and blue to paint green directly on the table.

It didn't take a degree in early childhood development to predict there would be some cleaning up to do. But Cheryl Cady, the pre-kindergarten teacher directing the mayhem at School 34 on Lexington Avenue, seemed unperturbed as she rolled up her paint-stained sweater sleeves.

"They're just getting a ton of academics and socialization," she said. "You see tremendous growth from the beginning to the end of the year."

More and more children in Rochester are getting that opportunity. Enrollment in pre-kindergarten in Rochester has risen from 75 percent of 4-year-olds in 2011-12 to 95 percent in 2013-14, the result of a timely state grant, concerted efforts by the district and support from a number of other community organizations. That means an additional 350 students getting a head start on school.

It is the most promising finding in the

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Zi'Anah Gilbough, Kpaw Say, and Mikayla Dyer mix paint to make different colors at the Pre-K program at School 34.

MAX SCHULTE/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



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ROC the Future report card, formally released Friday morning. But the report is not all good news — it also shows that fewer than one in five Rochester students who enrolled at Monroe Community College in 2014 were ready for college-level work, down by half from 2012.

“This can be a slow process,” said Jennifer Leonard, president of the Rochester Area Community Foundation. “But I’m excited to be able to tell you this year that we’re beginning to see some improvements.”

ROC the Future, founded in 2011, is a coalition of dozens of Rochester organizations with the common goal of increasing support for city children from birth to college. This is the third year it has developed a report card detailing progress in a variety of areas.

Strides also have been made in the percentage of children born to mothers with early prenatal care (72 percent); in decreasing the number of children chronically absent from school, particularly in the lower grades; and in the high school graduate rate (51 percent in August 2014 and likely a few points higher in 2015).

It is no coincidence that the greatest successes have been tallied for younger children. Rochester School District Superintendent Bolgen Vargas and the coalition partners have made early literacy and health care a priority in the hope that those children’s gains would propel them ahead as teenagers.

Mayor Lovely Warren cited the two young men who allegedly fired into a crowd outside the Boys and Girls Club in August, killing three. She said greater investment in children when they’re young will help keep them from making desperate choices as young adults.

“If we don’t turn off the tap now, we’ll see the results when they hit 16, 17, 18, 19 years old,” she said. “The children of this city need to believe that this is a city of hope, a city of opportunity. And we can give them that hope.”

The gains in pre-kindergarten enrollment were largely thanks to a large state grant in 2013. The district also recently received \$12 million in state grant funding to offer full-day prekindergarten to 1,000 3-year-olds beginning in January.

On the other end of the spectrum, just 18 percent of district graduates who entered MCC had the academic skills necessary for their first-year coursework. That number is down from 36 percent in 2012.

MCC President Anne Kress attributed the drop in part to rising standards but said much work remains to be done at the early secondary level, getting ninth- and 10thgraders on track to graduate in the first place.

The longer goal is for today’s pre-kindergarten pupils to develop into a successful cohort of college students. That, of course, will take time.

“We’re not going to see a change in those numbers for quite some time,” Kress said. “That’s the reality, and what it tells you is that we need to ramp things up.”

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MCC PRESIDENT ANNE KRESS



Justin Washington Jr. plays dress-up with paraprofessional Joan Harris in the Pre-K program at School 34.

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