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Participants in Harrisburg Preschool Program score higher on tests

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Continued participation in the Harrisburg Preschool Program (HPP) has led fourth-grade students to score higher on Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) literacy and math tests than peers who have not participated in the HPP program, according to a recent evaluation by the Prevention Research Center at Penn State.

HPP is a collaborative program involving the Harrisburg School District (HSD) and Capital Area Head Start (CAHS) program, which provides comprehensive, high-quality preschool services to at-risk children in the Harrisburg area.

"This research demonstrates substantial long-term effects of the HPP program on children's reading and math achievement," said Mark Greenberg, principal investigator of the evaluation and director of the Prevention Research Center for the Promotion of Human Development at Penn State. "The fact that this advantage has now been documented on the state's standardized achievement tests through fourth-grade is additional evidence that preschool is critical for disadvantaged children, not only for their school readiness but for their longer-term achievement. Under former superintendent Dr. Gerald Kohn, this program demonstrated a major change in children's development."

Findings for mathematics achievement on the PSSA were dramatic: 42 percent of HPP students were found to be advanced or proficient while only 24 percent of nonattendees attained similar results. In all, the number of students advanced or proficient in mathematics increased by 75 percent. A higher number of students also were found to be advanced or proficient in reading achievement -- 32 percent among HPP attendees versus 24 percent among non-attendees, for a 33 percent increase.

The study also compared fourth-grade PSSA scores for children who received one versus two years of the Harrisburg preschool program. For mathematics, 46 percent of children who participated in HPP for two years were found to be advanced or proficient compared to 39 percent of children who participated for one year, an 18 percent increase. For reading, 34 percent of children in the two-year group and 30 percent in the one-year group were classified as advanced or proficient, a 13 percent increase.

These findings indicate that enrollment in this preschool program is having significant long-term effects on children's learning outcomes. Academic advantages are evident regardless of

one- or two-year enrollment in the preschool program but are stronger on the math assessment for children enrolled at age 3 and participating for two years.

"The HPP program has the important elements of high-quality preschool," Greenberg said. "This includes well-trained and well-equipped teachers; a vital and challenging curriculum in literacy, math and social emotional development; and a caring, supportive classroom environment that nurtures the learning of young children."

The HPP evaluation is directed by Greenberg and Celene Domitrovich of the Prevention Research Center at Penn State and supported by funding from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. The evaluation of HPP will end in June 2011 when all students have completed the fifth grade.

The Harrisburg Preschool Program was established in 2002 with funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and a strong partnership with Capital Area Head Start, operated by Keystone Children's Services.

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