District to launch pre-K in place of 1st-grade program

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The Halifax School District is hoping to replace its 20-year-old remedial program for first-graders next year with a proposed pre-K initiative .

Gov. Ed Rendell's proposed 2007-08 education budget calls for $75 million for the launch of Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, which would be a new part of the state's $350 million accountability block grant program.

Pre-K Counts is designed to give 11,000 at-risk children across Pennsylvania an early start to learning through voluntary pre-K programs.

"An effective pre-K program makes early learning a family activity," Halifax Superintendent James P. Dull said.

The Halifax program will be geared to 4-year-olds at approved sites within schools or child-care facilities. Local child-care providers are considering whether to participate with the district, Dull said.

At the same time, the district is eliminating its Developmental One program for first-graders with developmental delays. Officials say more students will benefit from pre-K remediation than waiting until first grade.

"General research ... shows the importance of preschool enrollment as a predictor of later success in life," Dull said. "Quality early learning programs effectively assist at-risk children to be better prepared for school and reduce achievement gaps that appear during the early school years."

State money would cover Pre-K Counts' initial costs, but the district plans to start a program next year for at-risk 4-year-olds even if state money isn't available, Dull said. The district pays about $72,500 a year for the Developmental One program. That's about the same cost as running the pre-K program if state money isn't available.

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