

Touting the success of early learning centers in teaching social and academic skills to poor and special needs children, Rep. Steny H. Hoyer, D-Md., announced Fri., Jan. 14, plans to introduce legislation to expand community schools nationwide.

Hoyer joined State Schools Superintendent Nancy S. Grasmick, Prince George's County Schools Superintendent William R. Hite, Jr., Amber Waller and Peggy Higgins of the Prince George's County Board of Education, and others for a tour of the Judy Hoyer Family Learning Center. Judy Centers – named in tribute to Rep. Hoyer's late wife and longtime early childhood advocate Judith Hoyer – are designed to improve the school readiness skills of children ages birth through 5 by providing comprehensive early childhood services to both the students and their families.

"Classroom education is only a piece of the puzzle when it comes to ensuring that all children succeed," said Hoyer, noting the successes of the centers.

A report from the Maryland State Department of Education found that during the 2008 and 2009 school year, young children who participated in pre-kindergarten and other child care and education services at the center were better prepared for school than those students who did not attend. Even students receiving free and reduced-priced meals, Special Education services and help with English Language were found to be "fully ready" for kindergarten if they had first attended a Judy Center or an early learning program, the report said.

"We should not ask our taxpayers to invest money if we do not get a return on those hard-earned dollars," Hoyer told a crowd of parents, educators and community leaders who had assembled at the center. "They work hard for those dollars. They get up early. They go to work. They play by the rules. They have to worry about their child care. And they want to make sure that the dollars they send to Upper Marlboro, Annapolis or Washington are used in a way that gets results."

Grasmick said that there are 25 Judy Centers in the state that serve 12,000 children, and that success is evident in seven domains: personal and social, language and literacy, social studies, mathematical thinking, scientific thinking, the arts and physical development.

"And then the question is always asked of me ... 'well it might be great when they come to kindergarten but is this sustained progress?' We've been tracking children in our public school systems where we have Judy Centers and every third grade cohort of children is achieving at a higher level than the previous cohort of children. So the answer is affirmative. Yes, it is sustained."

Hoyer said that Maryland's Judy Centers partner with the community to provide children and their families with a full range of services. The centers "have been a success in giving children the tools they need to come to school prepared to learn and excel."

"We believe we can build on this idea to help more children throughout the country reach their full potential," he said. "In the coming weeks I will introduce legislation in the House that would apply the successes we have had in Maryland's Judy Centers to expand the idea of

full-service education throughout the country, so that children receive supportive wraparound services in addition to high quality education.”

In other findings, the MSDE report said:

At 65 percent, Judy Centers serve a significantly larger proportion of kindergartners receiving special services (free and reduced price meals, special education, and English Language Learners) than the 47 percent in Maryland’s public school system overall.

Seventy-one percent of children who took advantage of early childhood programs and services at Judy Centers were fully ready for kindergarten in the fall of 2009, compared to 63 percent of kindergartners that did not have prior Judy Center experience.

By spring of the kindergarten year, children who had prior Judy Center experience continued to outrank their peers who did not.