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Shoemaker continues to push for pre-kindergarten

By Sean Flynn
Staff writer

The overall goal of the Newport School Committee's Pre-Kindergarten Subcommittee is to have every student in the city's public schools reading proficiently by the time he or she completes third grade.

Key to reaching that goal is providing every 4-year-old child in the city access to a quality pre-kindergarten program, subcommittee members say. But, they say, that is currently not the case.

Former School Committee Chairman Charles P. Shoemaker, co-chairman of the subcommittee with School Committee member Kathleen Silvia, presented a comprehensive report to the full committee this week that outlined the challenges facing educators in the city.

The 2016 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook released this week shows that only 37 percent of this city's third-graders are proficient readers, Shoemaker said. Research by the Anne E. Casey Foundation, a nonprofit organization based in Baltimore, and other institutions has shown that students who are not proficient readers by the end of third grade are more likely to drop out of high school, he said.

Newport's high school dropout rate was 15 percent, according to Kids Count, a nonprofit organization that advocates for children, Shoemaker said. The new Factbook is based on the most recently available statewide data from 2014 and 2015.

That dropout rate was "the second highest in the state," with only Woonsocket having a higher dropout rate, he said.

The state Department of Health recently informed the School Department that there are approximately 330 4-year-old children in

the city, Shoemaker said. Of these children, many are enrolled in a pre-kindergarten program, but there are 131 children "missing" pre-K education, he said.

"We have some talented outreach people who could find the missing kids if only they had the names and addresses, but the health department has not given us this information," Shoemaker said. "We could probably accommodate these missing students if they were located."

Shoemaker and School Superintendent Colleen Burns Jermain met with Nicole Alexander-Scott, director of the state Department of Health, in August 2015 to make a case for receiving state data showing the names and addresses of all children living in Newport between birth and the age of 5.

"She indicated we could have the demographic data, but not the use of the KidsNet ID," Shoemaker said.

All children born in Rhode Island are enrolled in the KidsNet database, according to the state website. Children who were not born in the state but live in Rhode Island are included in the database when they see a Rhode Island pediatrician.

Shoemaker said the School Department only is asking for data allowed under the Federal Educational Records Privacy Act, which includes the release of names and

addresses.

"We could adopt our own ID number; but when we begin to share data with other pre-K programs, it would mean that each program would now have two separate ID numbers and the child's information might be misfiled," Shoemaker said.

Shoemaker has been fighting this battle for years now.

In 2009, he co-founded Baby

Steps, a local program aimed at engaging parents in their children's education, beginning at birth. Those operating the program meet at the Florence Gray Center with parents and their children up to the age of 3.

Hoping to track how well those children do — as well as children in Early Head Start, Head Start and Newport's pre-kindergarten programs — after they enter school, Shoemaker asked the Department of Health to release limited information to Newport officials. He also would like to track the progress of children participating in other programs, such as those offered by the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center and private pre-kindergartens, to get a sense of what works best.

When Department of Health officials repeatedly refused Shoemaker's request with the explanation that the information he sought is contained in KidsNet, which is defined by state law to be personal, individually identifiable records that are confidential, he appealed to the office of state Attorney General Peter F. Kilmartin under the Access to Public Records Law.

Shoemaker at the time sought the information under the section of the law that allows an exemption for qualified persons. A School Committee official doing a retrospective data review of students' accomplishments meets the requirement of a qualified person, he argued.

The attorney general's office denied Shoemaker's request. The office ruled in July 2013 that KidsNet data is exempt from public disclosure under the Access to Public Records Act.

Shoemaker said he believes that opinion did not consider

allowed exemptions under the act and added that regulations have changed since then.

Legislation passed by the state General Assembly in 2009 calls for every child to have access to pre-kindergarten education, but that is not the case currently, he said.

“If communities don’t know the names and locations of children under 5, how can the state fulfill its own law that each child will have access to a high-quality program?” Shoemaker asked.

“Once we have the data, we should be able to identify best practices or identify children who were left behind and take correction,” Shoemaker wrote at the conclusion of his report. “That will not happen overnight, but it should help us reach our goal of having every child who enters kindergarten graduate from high school.”

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