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Child-care advocates hopeful after court ruling

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A Circuit Court judge's ruling that South Carolina isn't preparing its preschool children for their academic future has local child-care advocates hopeful that more change is on the way.

Exactly what will happen next -- and whether the landmark case will change how South Carolina funds its schools -- still remained a matter of many opinions Friday as state leaders mulled over the ruling, which came late Thursday afternoon.

Lawyers for school districts that sued South Carolina over education funding declared victory, saying they see no need to appeal Judge Thomas Cooper's decision unless the state does.

"We do not think we will appeal because, essentially, we won the case," said Carl Epps, a lead attorney for the districts. "We are extremely pleased and have a court ruling that we can use to enhance our children's opportunities."

The state's lawyer, Bobby Stepp, said he must consult with his clients before making any decision on an appeal. The state has 30 days to take any action, he said.

Gov. Mark Sanford said the state shouldn't extend the court battle that began a dozen years ago, but instead "focus our energies ... on improving the quality of education for the students that need it most."

According to Cooper's ruling, the state's system of funding education does not provide students in the plaintiff school districts with the opportunity to receive a minimally adequate education because it does not sufficiently fund early childhood education.

Full-day kindergarten for 4-year olds

State Superintendent of Education Inez Tenenbaum met last week with lawmakers, members of Gov. Sanford's staff, and representatives from First Steps and private child-care providers to "come up with a proposal that has some consensus behind it," Education Department spokesman Jim Foster said Friday.

The group is discussing how to provide full-day kindergarten for all the state's estimated 28,000 4-year-olds considered at risk for academic failure.

Spartanburg's Mary Black Foundation made a commitment more than two years ago to help raise awareness on the importance of early childhood development.

The foundation gave grants to 10 centers to help them make improvements and garner endorsements from the National Association for Education of Young Children, the nation's largest organization of childhood professionals.

Currently, there are only four in Spartanburg County that are NAEYC accredited.

They include Spartanburg Regional Healthcare System's Ida Thompson Child Development Program; the Middle Tyger Community Center; Westminster Presbyterian Day School; and the Child Development Center at the University of South Carolina Upstate.

Foundation Program Manager Curt McPhail said helping prepare preschool children for their future not only benefits them, but is critical to communities as well.

"Research shows that investments in early childhood education are worth it -- for all kids," McPhail said.

"While some need more than others, the fact of the matter is that all kids need a quality start."

South Carolina First Steps Director Susan DeVenny released a statement Friday, saying that Cooper's ruling echoes recent educational research.

"As the state's agency whose sole focus is preparing young children for school, we believe that research bears out the ruling's significant finding -- targeted investment in high-quality early childhood education pays dividends in both short and long-term impacts for our children, and ultimately for the state's economy," DeVenny said.

"We look forward to working with lawmakers and our partner agencies to ensure the coordinated provision of high quality early learning experiences to our state's most impoverished children."

Ida Thompson, who runs the child care development center at Spartanburg Regional, said Cooper's long-awaited ruling allows for more conversations to be had concerning the importance of preparing the state's youngest students for school.

"This is a good opportunity to get our word out there," Thompson said.

The Associated Press contributed to the report.

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