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New Effort Aims to Support Preschool Social Skills

The \$14 million ParentCorps program aims to assist preschool staffers in helping young students develop

By **LESLIE BRODY**

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As more than 1 million New York City children start public school on Thursday, officials have promised a new resource: More support helping the youngest ones develop social skills.

The city plans to spend nearly \$14 million over the next three years on ParentCorps, a program based at NYU Langone Medical Center that aims to assist many preschool staffers and families in helping preschoolers take turns, verbalize their feelings and get along. Such skills are widely seen as foundations for learning.

ParentCorps is expected to provide training for about 1,000 preschool workers, along with 14-week workshops for parents at some sites and professional development for social workers.

This increasing focus on social and emotional support to prevent disruptive behavior comes as many districts are taking steps to limit suspensions and expulsions for young children. This week New Jersey curtailed such removals in preschool through second grade, with certain exceptions, such as if a child brings a gun to school.

This summer, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio announced plans to ban suspensions in kindergarten through second grade, though the details haven't been clarified or adopted. The city already bars such removals from public preschool.

“We feel really strongly about it,” said Josh Wallack, a deputy schools chancellor. “We need to provide supports to pre-K leaders and teachers to carry out alternatives.”

Many states have been experimenting with techniques to prevent unruly behavior early on. A study released Thursday found promise in a Connecticut program that gave preschool teachers access to mental-health professionals, who helped them deal with students' aggression, hyperactivity and other distracting behaviors.

The research, by the Yale Child Study Center, part of the Yale School of Medicine, looked at a statewide program called the Early Childhood Consultation Partnership from 2008 to 2010. Through the program, which is ongoing, a preschool director can ask for a consultant—at no charge—to help teachers improve their classroom-management skills or deal with a specific child who was hitting, biting or acting up.

Funded by state grant for up to \$2.4 million, the program's interventions last two or three months and involve the child's parents as well.

The study published Thursday in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* divided 88 classes randomly into a group that would get the service and a group that wouldn't. It found that children who got the intervention had significantly fewer problem behaviors afterward than their peers. The study of short-term outcomes didn't include a long-term follow-up, however.

Walter Gilliam, an author of the study, said one key to the Connecticut program's success was having the consultant work with a parent and teacher together, leaving them with a stronger rapport and strategies to handle a child.

"We were able to find very big positive impacts in a relatively short period of time," Dr. Gilliam said. "It tells you the model can work. It doesn't tell you that everybody who attempts it will make it work. It comes down to the quality of implementation."

Mr. Wallack, the deputy chancellor, took a team of about a dozen people to visit Dr. Gilliam in New Haven, Conn., during the summer to discuss such mental-health services for city students.

Write to Leslie Brody at leslie.brody@wsj.com