

State invests in preschoolers

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INDIANAPOLIS - Lilly Flynn hasn't entered kindergarten yet but the 5-yearold from Georgetown, Indiana, is already reading at a beginner's level, thanks in part to lessons she completes five nights a week after dinner, according to her mother.

Lilly is one of about 100 children participating in a pilot project called UPSTART. The computer-based kindergarten- readiness program that features 15minute lessons has generated buzz — and some questions — in Indiana as lawmakers set aside \$1 million for such programs in a measure aimed at helping poor children.

"She's motivated and loves the fact she can read now," Lilly's mother, Jill Flynn, said "She gets on, she can learn, she's able to read books like her big brother."

UPSTART, developed by Utah-based Waterford Institute, has been embraced by the Utah Legislature and piloted in several states, including South Carolina, Ohio, Mississippi and Pennsylvania. Research shows it helps students develop literacy skills before entering kindergarten, but some education experts remain wary about computer-based programs' effectiveness in promoting behavioral or social learning.

In Indiana, preschool was a high-profile issue this legislative session, as lawmakers disagreed about how much to expand a state program that sends poor children to preschool, a top priority for Republican Gov. Eric Holcomb and GOP House Speaker Brian Bosma. They ultimately agreed to send additional money to that program — with an added provision for "technology-based in-home early education services."

Early education advocates say they are pleased with the state's overall investment, which nearly doubles the funding and expands the program for poor children from five counties to up to 15 counties. But some believe funding should have gone to proven high quality preschool programs for low-income students before the online programming.

"I had hoped that whatever investment the state would make in pre-K would be in classroom-based pre-K that would be in a quality setting and led by a skilled teacher," said Ted Maple, CEO of Early Learning Indiana.

UPSTART provides children with personalized online lessons, books, songs and activities designed to improve reading and other skills, focusing on preparing students for kindergarten. It also encourages parents to monitor their children's progress and engage with their studies.

To Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research, interacting with a computer and not real people and real things means students may not fully experience the "world of learning and feeling" that a rich early education program could provide.