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NEW SCHOOL BUDGET EXPANDS PRE-K PROGRAM

PRATTVILLE - Alabama's new education budget will allow the state's pre-kindergarten program for 4-year-olds to add more than 1,000 students across the state.

"The best is yet to come for the children of this state," said Marquita Davis, director of the state Office of School Readiness.

Gov. Bob Riley and state education officials visited a pre-kindergarten program in Prattville on Thursday for Riley to conduct a ceremonial signing of the education budget passed by the Legislature in a special session last month. Riley actually signed the budget into law on Monday without any festivities.

The budget for the 2008-2009 school year is \$370 million smaller than this year's budget due to the national economic slowdown and overspending in this year's budget. It cuts most facets of education, but it doubles the appropriation for Davis' office from \$10 million to \$20 million.

Not all the increase is going into the pre-kindergarten program overseen by Davis' office. The Legislature set aside \$950,000 for Head Start and \$1.7 million for the Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters program through the state Department of Education.

Davis said the pre-kindergarten program will add 103 classrooms across the state and will expand from 2,322 students for the 2007-2008 school year to 3,384 when the new academic year starts in August. That's 5.5 percent of Alabama's 4-year-olds.

Last year, the National Institute for Early Education rated Alabama and North Carolina as the only two states where the pre-kindergarten program met all quality benchmarks recommended by the institute, but it rated Alabama last in access among the 38 states with programs because Alabama's program is so small.

Riley's goal is to keep expanding the program in the 2½ years remaining in his second term. Davis said the program has proven it helps prepare 4-year-olds for success in school.

Riley's budget ceremony came a few hours after the Annie E. Casey Foundation released its 2008 Kids Count data book, which ranked Alabama 47th among the states in conditions for children - up one notch from last year's ranking of 48th.

Linda Tilly, an Alabama children's advocate who helps with the data book, said she is optimistic that the expansion of the pre-kindergarten program will better educate children and will help improve Alabama's ranking in future reports.

"I am encouraged about the future," said Tilly, executive director of Voices for Alabama's Children.

Davis' office gives grants to private, public and church-run pre-kindergarten programs. That allows the state's limited resources to go into operations rather than construction of new classrooms at public schools, Riley said.

The voluntary program is open to children of any family, but parents pay according to their income.

The amount ranges from \$40 to \$300 per month, but some centers raise revenue through other sources to cover the \$40 fee for the lowest-income parents, Davis said.