

**'Virtual pre-K' offers new ways to learn**

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By Janet Rausa Fuller, Staff Reporter

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At Joseph Stockton Child-Parent Center, a preschool in the Uptown neighborhood, 3- and 4-year-old students make their own books and present them to their peers at an "author's luncheon."

Their parents, meanwhile, learn how to use laptop computers and take turns helping teachers in classrooms.

The school operates on a typical half-day schedule. Yet, last September, it began a 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. program for 20 students whose parents work.

And soon, all Stockton tots and parents will begin a first-of-its-kind "virtual pre-K" program being implemented in Chicago Public Schools.

Stockton is unique, exactly the type of environment from which families and communities thrive, said Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), who was in Chicago on Tuesday to tour Stockton and Best Practices High School on the West Side.

"This is truly a national model," said Kennedy, a champion of early childhood education and chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. "For all we're trying to do from K through 12, it makes no sense not to understand what can be done even earlier."

The Massachusetts Democrat, accompanied by Chicago Schools CEO Arne Duncan and Rep Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), endeared himself to students upon his arrival by singing "Itsy Bitsy Spider." Kennedy was visibly impressed by a mock demonstration of the virtual program--the first of its kind in the nation.

Meant to extend learning from the classroom into the home, the program is based around a videotape, CD-ROM and Web site outlining activities parents and their children can do at home.

The materials, available in English or Spanish, are already in use in 400 preschool classrooms in Chicago and are being distributed to public libraries so that any parent can access them, said virtual pre-K director Alicia Narvaez.

The hope, Narvaez said, is for virtual learning to catch on across the nation.

But more funding is necessary for that to happen, Kennedy said.

He criticized the Bush administration's education budget proposal, which he said slashes \$90 million from elementary and secondary school programs covered by the Leave No Child Behind Act, passed this January.

"We're talking about a budget of \$2.1 trillion. It seems to me we oughta be able to find in that the necessary resources to invest in the children of this country," he said.