Preschool students Stephanie A. and Dawnes V. play during preschool welcome week at the Children’s Learning Centers of Fairfield County William Pitt branch in Stamford, Conn. Wednesday, Aug. 22, 2018. 169 new students were eased into the school day routine with a two-hour "transition day" on Wednesday, followed by a three and a half hour day ...

Photo: Tyler Sizemore / Hearst Connecticut Media

STAMFORD — Parents who remember a trip to the pediatrician as the only required pre-kindergarten evaluation may be surprised to hear that today their kids are assessed on
everything from literacy to social skills before they show up the first day.

The trend is part of a growing body of research that shows routine evaluation in early childhood — followed up with targeted supports to meet kids needs — improves their long-term academic success.

In Stamford, as with other districts, a network of community groups, pre-schools and public school systems has coalesced to promote a range of assessments designed to provide important data for educators.

Last year, in conjunction with Stamford Public Schools, The Stamford Public Education Foundation launched an ambitious initiative to get 90 percent of students registered for kindergarten to complete one particular assessment, the Preschool Early Literacy Indicator, known as PELI.

The PELI assessment, like many of the other early childhood evaluations common today, is relatively quick and simple, said Matt Quinones, SPEF’s chief executive officer.

An adult reads a book alongside a student and then, based on the book, asks a series of questions to assess the student’s vocabulary, reading comprehension and knowledge of the alphabet. The whole PELI assessment takes about 15 to 20 minutes, said Quinones.

Most of Stamford’s students took the PELI assessment at their kindergarten orientation in May, but for those who didn’t, SPEF held four community events in the early mornings and evenings where an additional 150 students were given the assessment. To catch those students who were still not tested, SPEF hired 13 consultants trained in PELI and gave each a caseload of students to track down and assess before the school year, Quinones said.

In 2018, the initiative’s inaugural year, SPEF assessed 995 students, about 75 percent of Stamford’s kindergarten class for that year. Prior to the first day of school, SPEF paid the kindergarten teachers to attend a “Student Insight Day,” where they were shown the data and how to act on it in the classroom, including grouping students by their area of weakness — such as knowledge of the alphabet — and tailoring learning to the needs of each group.

The results from the first year were strong, administrators said.
Literacy scores on the school’s 2019 mid-year mCLASS assessment, the main standardized test for kindergartners, improved over the 2018 scores a total of 26 percent among students who took the PELI and 22 percent for the kindergarten class overall.

“In our current landscape, data becomes such a critical tool in educating students, but PELI itself is not an intervention program that’s going to move the needle. It’s really what the teachers do with that info that makes it valuable. The teachers deserve the credit. The tool itself is not enough,” said Quinones.

Just as important as knowing a student’s literacy skills, pre-kindergarten is knowing a students’ behavioral patterns, said Stamford Public Schools Director of Early Childhood Education Kendra Brown. That’s why Brown said the Pre-school to Kindergarten Transition Summary (PKTS) is such a good complement to the PELI.

For the PKTS, pre-school teachers fill out a form on how each student has performed in the classroom, such as whether they are shy or outgoing.

Brown co-chairs a committee on kindergarten readiness at the Stamford Cradle to Career, a subset of the United Way of Western Connecticut, which launched an effort in 2017 to have pre-school teachers fill out the PKTS and give the forms to the students’ kindergarten teacher in advance of the year.

Last year, 75 percent of Stamford public school students started the school year with a completed PKTS.

Teachers are more prepared and better equipped to bond with each student if they know their behavioral history before school starts, Brown said.

“With little kids, it’s all about interaction and connection. If they feel the school is a welcoming space, they’re much more ready to learn because they feel safe and welcomed,” Brown said.

svaughan@hearstmediact.com; 203-964-2265; @SophieCVaughan1