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## Head start program returns

By JEFF MILL  
The Herald Press

PORTLAND — The town will once again have a Head Start program. The Board of Education voted last week to restore the program, which

was canceled three years ago when a bulge in the school population meant there was no more room at the Valley View School to continue the program.

But now, the bulge has lessened, and space has opened up at the Gildersleeve Elementary School. School officials have agreed to lease a

classroom at Gildersleeve to a Middletown group that will administer the program for up to 20 Portland children.

Head Start is intended to boost the efforts of pre-school children from low-income families, and provide them with "increased school readiness" to

enable them to compete more evenly and effectively.

"I think it's a great opportunity," Interim Superintendent of Schools Dean T. Toepfer said.

What's more, he told the Board of Education, "These are our kids."

"It will be filled up with Portland

people; our people get first crack at it," he said later.

"There will be 20 at most," Toepfer continued. We're giving them at average-sized classroom, which is right by a couple of bathrooms and also has a

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handicapped-accessible entrance.

"Kindergarten used to just be a social thing," he said. "Now, before they finish kindergarten, kids are beginning to read." And, Toepfer said, "In places where they have all-day (as opposed to half-day) kindergarten, they're doing what you did in third grade."

In fact, without the opportunities afforded by the program, Toepfer said, studies have shown that kids will have a great deal of difficulty as they

progress through school.

First Selectwoman Susan S. Bransfield had previously worked in a Head Start program in New Britain, and she has made reinstatement of the program a priority since she took office.

"It's been shown to have a real benefit throughout a child's school years," she explained.

What's more, Bransfield said, "I am a firm believer in quality pre-school program." (There are, she noted, a number of similar pre-school programs run through various churches in town.)

The classroom at Gildersleeve is being leased to

the Community Renewal Team Inc., which will administer the program.

"It's right by the library," Toepfer told the board, "and we have arranged it so they can use the cafeteria for lunch and also use our gymnasium." In addition, he said, CRT has agreed to install "an age-appropriate Playscape" at Gildersleeve for the Head Start students, and they will erect a fence around the Playscape to help ensure the children's safety.

And, Toepfer said, "We have made a 3-5 year commitment to continue this program. It's not fair to the people of the town to start a program and then drop

it."

The program will have a very limited impact on the town, Toepfer said. "They'll have their own telephone, and there will be no transportation; the parents will bring the children in and pick them up."

He said the school system will charge CRT a nominal sum — between \$3,000 and \$5,000, "depending on whether they use their own custodian or ours." But, he added, "we're not in this to make money; we're in this to break even."

To contact Jeff Mill, call (860) 347-3331 ext. 221 or e-mail [jmill@middletownpress.com](mailto:jmill@middletownpress.com).