Early childhood education experts generally agree that, while it’s too early to call the city’s pre-K program a complete success, the initiative appears to be working so far. | AP Photo

De Blasio’s win on pre-K is making an easy campaign even easier

By ELIZA SHAPIRO | 10/17/2017 05:04 AM EDT
Bo Dietl inadvertently blurted out an uncomfortable truth for Mayor Bill de Blasio’s opponents during last week’s mayoral debate, even as the independent candidate spent much of the night trying to humiliate the incumbent mayor.

“The only good thing he ever did was — I like that pre-K stuff,” Dietl said of de Blasio’s first term.

The establishment of universal pre-kindergarten for four-year-olds in public schools was a central focus of de Blasio’s campaign, and, after a few hiccups and some help from Gov. Andrew Cuomo, the mayor delivered on the promise in his first year in office.

Dietl isn’t the only de Blasio foe who has grudgingly conceded the accomplishment. Virulent critics of the mayor in the charter schools sector have been all but silent on the program. Skeptics in de Blasio’s own party have abandoned early criticisms. And academics who cast doubt on the efficacy of the program have since come around.

Now, as the mayor faces attacks on everything from his management style to failing city subways, the successful creation and rollout of a 70,000-seat universal pre-kindergarten program in America’s largest public school system may best explain the mayor’s seemingly inevitable reelection in November.

“Universal pre-K was a home run with the bases loaded for de Blasio,” said Joseph Viteritti, a professor at Hunter College and the author of “The Pragmatist: Bill de Blasio’s Quest to Save the Soul of New York.” “It not only makes sense educationally, it provided free essential child care for thousands of working people. Most New Yorkers relate to that, putting the policy out of bounds to challengers.”

Conscious of the program’s success, the mayor has wielded his pre-K victory like a shield in which his foes have thus far failed to make a dent.

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“A lot of folks said it couldn’t be done, it couldn’t be done that quickly, it couldn’t reach every child,” the mayor said this month. “Guess what? It all happened. It worked.”

Without the win on pre-K, de Blasio would have mostly mixed results to point to in his espoused agenda to reduce income inequality and give the city’s most vulnerable populations a leg up.

Homelessness has surged under the mayor’s watch, and he has, even by his own admission, failed to get the crisis under control. Many of De Blasio’s affordable housing reforms have been met with intense protest which has slowed progress on that front. And his attempts to mend long-standing animosity between the police and low-income communities of color have satisfied neither police reform advocates nor police union brass.

It’s unsurprising, then, that the mayor seems to never miss an opportunity to highlight what some critics say is his only substantive accomplishment.

During the recent mayoral debate, de Blasio fielded complaints that he is a poor manager from Dietl and his Republican challenger, Assemblywoman Nicole Malliotakis, by steering the conversation back to his administration’s relatively smooth pre-K implementation.

Critics more steeped in academic policy than Dietl have also conceded the program’s success.

Bruce Fuller, a researcher at the University of California, Berkeley, was perhaps the most influential academic to critique the city’s pre-K program in its early days. In the first years of the rollout, he said the mayor’s insistence on making the initiative universal ignored data showing that low-income children have the most to gain from early childhood programs.

But earlier this year, Fuller released new research that middle-class students in high-quality pre-K programs also post big academic and social-emotional gains. Fuller said he was beginning to feel “warmer” about the city’s program.

Shael Polakow-Suransky, a top education official under former Mayor Michael Bloomberg who now serves as president of the Bank Street College of Education, said he’s encouraged by what he sees in the city’s pre-K classrooms.
“Over time we’ll see student learning outcomes, but the conditions now are right and they are promising,” Suransky, whose beliefs on education are in many ways diametrically opposed to the mayor’s, said this summer.

“Under Mayor de Blasio, schools are safer than ever, Pre-K is universal, and test scores and graduation rates continue to rise,” said Dan Levitan, a spokesman for the mayor’s reelection campaign. “That is the Mayor’s education record and one that New Yorkers are rallying around.”

Pre-K has also won the mayor some of the best headlines of his tenure: “How New York Made Pre-K A Success” read one on The New York Times’ opinion page; “The Lessons of Mayor Bill de Blasio’s Universal Pre-K Initiative” appeared on The New Yorker’s website; “Will New York City Lead the Way on Pre-K?” asked The Nation.

And while de Blasio’s efforts to become a national progressive standard-bearer have mostly fallen flat, he has won praise from a host of big-name Democrats on pre-K, including Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, Nancy Pelosi and Bernie Sanders.

In the weeks before Clinton announced her presidential candidacy in 2015, she visited a pre-K classroom in Brownsville with de Blasio and his wife, Chirlane McCray. The mayor, Clinton said, had bucked a stereotype about Democrats she herself was hoping to combat: De Blasio wasn’t, “just doing it rhetorically, but delivering on it,” she said of the pre-K program.

And though a spokesman for Obama spelled the mayor’s name wrong, the president singled out New York for its work on pre-K in 2014: “President Obama applauds Governor Cuomo and Mayor DeBlasio for the remarkable work accomplished this week in New York, where lawmakers delivered a major victory on early childhood education for middle class families and those working to get into the middle class.”

Early childhood education experts generally agree that, while it’s too early to call the city’s pre-K program a complete success, the initiative appears to be working so far.

Pamela Morris, an NYU Steinhardt professor who is one of the leaders of NYU’s independent evaluation of the city’s pre-K program, said she’s been impressed by the results thus far.

"What has been so remarkable about the city’s effort on pre-K to date is that they have kept their commitment to quality front and center from day one, even while delivering pre-K to all New York City children," she said. "Measures of quality are at levels that are impressive
for this early phase of the program and bode quite well for delivering on the promise of NYC’s pre-K program for children’s learning and development.”

About 84 percent of the city’s pre-K programs are boosting students’ academic outcomes, according to an independent evaluation that used a national early childhood rating scale known as ECERS. The vast majority of pre-K parents — 92 percent — rated their child’s program “excellent” or “good” in surveys this year. And city officials say parents with children enrolled in public pre-K programs save an average of $10,000 a year on child care costs.

Then-Public Advocate de Blasio first announced his intention to build a citywide pre-K program during an Association for a Better New York speech in October 2012 and put it at the center of his campaign when he announced his mayoral bid in early 2013. But the idea failed to catch on for months as de Blasio languished in the polls. As he unexpectedly surged ahead of his Democratic challengers in the late summer of 2013, and eventually won his long-shot run for City Hall, de Blasio’s laser-like focus on pre-K became an essential part of his newfound appeal.

The mayor’s plan encountered some early stumbles. He failed to win the fight for a millionaire’s tax in Albany to pay for the program, but Cuomo, eager to get involved in the push, decided the state would pay for the brunt of the city’s pre-K program.

As City Hall set out to hire and train thousands of new teachers and get hundreds of classrooms up to legally mandated building and fire codes, it seemed unlikely that the brand-new administration would be able to pull off the enormous expansion. Some experts wondered aloud whether programs in public schools would be higher-quality than similar programs in community-based organizations.

Deputy Mayor Richard Buery, who was put in charge of all things pre-K, spent the frenzied summer of 2014 recruiting families, getting buildings up to code and setting teacher training in motion. In the waning days of August, Buery declared that the city was ready.

But just days before the first day of school in 2014, city Comptroller Scott Stringer, who has flirted with mayoral ambitions of his own, warned that the city hadn’t submitted the vast majority of pre-K contracts. De Blasio’s enemies among the city’s charter school sector advised reporters to visit the Department of Education’s second headquarters in downtown Brooklyn, where long lines of pre-K teachers waited for hours to have their fingerprints taken.

Still, the program launched with only minor logistical hiccups.
Stringer quickly turned his criticism to easier targets like homelessness and housing. Charter leaders stopped pushing on pre-K and focused on de Blasio’s education agenda liabilities, including his Renewal program for struggling schools.

De Blasio’s success with pre-K has prompted something of a policy sequel as the mayor seeks his second term. In a campaign critics have called short on big new ideas, the mayor has rolled out an extension of the term one victory: 3-K for All, a pre-K program for three-year-olds.

A recent press conference announcing the details of the program began with a video accompanied by piano music and a narrator crooning about the 2014 pre-K rollout: “There were many doubters, they said it would never come true. ... Once upon a time a city came together with a vision to shake the foundations of education.”

Despite the lofty rhetoric, observers say de Blasio is likely safe resting on his laurels. David Bloomfield, a professor of education at CUNY’s Graduate Center and Brooklyn College, said de Blasio’s pre-K win has made a quiet race even easier for the mayor.

“Having one singular generational initiative is more than enough to run on,” he said. “Especially on a high-profile issue that combines social, educational and managerial skill.”