

Funding means class for 36 more local kids

Even after increase, state doesn't serve three of every four eligible Washington preschoolers

By Paris Achen

As of Sunday, August 28, 2011

An additional 36 low-income children in Southwest Washington will be able to attend state-subsidized preschool in the fall due to a boost in federal grant money and an increased state focus on early-childhood education.

The new student slots are part of a total of 165 additional slots this fall in the state's Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program, paid for with a \$2.2 million increase in money from the federal Child Care & Development Fund for the 2011-2013 biennium.

"That really is a pretty significant thing, because almost everything in the state budget except ECEAP was cut or kept at level funding," said Doug Lehrman, executive director of Educational Opportunities for Children and Families. That agency is one of two in Clark County that provide preschool through the state program.

The increased investment is part of a concerted national and state effort to increase early-childhood education. It's evidence of wider acceptance of prevailing research that shows quality preschool programs provide both short- and long-term benefits to children and are crucial to closing the achievement gap, said Jackie Brock, school readiness manager at regional Educational Service District 112's Child Care & Family Services.

The additional slots build on the state's Early Learning Plan, which increases access to state preschool. The program is part of the state's Department of Early Learning, recently formed to help coordinate state efforts to increase early learning programs. The state Office of Fiscal Management says the program will get a total of about \$57.1 million this year and next.

3 years old only once

Vancouver's state Rep. Tim Probst, vice-chair of the Legislature's Education Appropriation and Oversight Committee, said it was important to him to support the state preschool program because early learning is an investment that has been shown to work.

"It's time-sensitive," Probst said. "A child doesn't get age 3 and 4 back, and the development that occurs at that moment is vital to their success in school and later in life. It has ripple effects. The positive impacts of early learning continue throughout the K-12 system and further."

However, even with the increase, only about 25 percent of eligible children in the state have places in subsidized preschool programs, Lehrman said. Educational Opportunities will serve 395 children in the fall, which includes 27 of the regions new positions. The waiting list for slots, though, includes just as many children, he said.

"Typically, we take the most in need," Lehrman said.

The educational service district adds nine positions this fall to its existing 70, Brock said.

The state preschool program is similar to the federal Head Start subsidized preschool program but offers fewer hours each session and serves families with a slightly higher income — about 110 percent of poverty level or \$24,585 for a family of four.

Children typically learn their numbers and letters in the program, and some can read before they enter kindergarten, Lehrman said. Those who have been in the program perform better in school and are less likely to drop out.

People should not underestimate how crucial the age 0-5 period is, said Debbie Ham, director of Vancouver's Support for Early Learning & Families.

"We know that within the first five years of life as much as 90 percent of brain development has occurred," Ham said. "Our children can't wait for adequate funding. We need to act now and support the whole child, the whole family and early learning."

A group of 22 community partners, including pediatricians and Clark County Public Health, formed Support for Early Learning & Families as a nonprofit in 2010 to promote early childhood education in Clark County.

A 40-year High/Scope Perry Preschool Program study of 123 low-income African-American children in Ypsilanti, Mich., assessed as high risk of academic failure, showed that each dollar spent on quality preschool saves about \$13 in costs associated with crime, welfare, education and taxes. The students in the program were less likely to be involved in crime and depend on social services than their counterparts and more likely to perform well in school, graduate and earn higher income.

That's why there's even a coalition of sheriffs who support early learning, Probst said.

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