

Child development center pushing state for more funding

By JUDITH O. ETZEL



Photo by Jerry Sowden - Rina Nerlich, the executive director of Child Development Centers Inc. in Venango County, has submitted an application for a \$1 million grant to expand the program for infants through kindergarten students.

A Venango County child development center is putting the pressure on state government to ante up funding to help expand pre-kindergarten educational classes and make them more affordable to middle-income families.

"The governor has put \$74 million in the proposed budget for pre-kindergarten education, making it the largest investment in Pennsylvania's history for pre-schoolers," said Rina Nerlich, executive director of Child Development Centers Inc. in Venango County.

"The legislature, though, is mixed on this. People are in favor of pre-school education but funding is the issue. Here we have a solution, at least in part, because it will provide free pre-school to 11,000 children," Nerlich said.

Her agency has submitted an application for a \$1 million grant to expand its child development program for children infant through kindergarten.

In a related effort, the Oil City Area School District is applying for \$450,000 to do the same thing within its

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service area.

"It certainly doesn't cover all children but it is a start," Nerlich said. "Other states, like North Carolina, have universal, free pre-school programs. We are way behind in Pennsylvania where 30 percent go to pre-school, even as research shows children who have early childhood programming prior to entering kindergarten have a higher academic success."

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Child Development Centers Inc. operates five accredited and highly rated pre-school centers, lists a staff of 100 employees and serves 550 local children from age birth to sixth grade. The private, non-profit agency provides services to youngsters throughout Venango County and in Meadville, Crawford County.

Enrollment, though, can be costly for a family that is ineligible for assistance because of income guidelines.

"Families that enroll a four-year old, for example, now pay \$130 a week and that's hard to do. The new funding (in Gov. Rendell's budget) would let us target families that are at 300 percent of the poverty rate - family of four making \$50,000 - and provide free pre-school for their four-year-olds," said Nerlich.

Specifically, the \$1 million grant to Child Development Centers Inc. would provide 200 slots for 4-year olds. Nerlich said every 4-year old will be eligible to apply for reduced or free enrollment in pre-school.

The local organization has one big advantage, said the director, because it has sufficient space to expand its pre-school program. The ability to accommodate an expansion, "is one of the biggest challenges and that is out of the way in Venango County," Nerlich said.

The Child Development Center grant application is aimed at pre-schoolers in the Valley Grove, Franklin and Cranberry school districts. The Oil City request will cover its own school district.

"We're hopeful about getting this grant because it gives us the means to meet our mission - educate children for kindergarten. It's a big deal for us," Nerlich said. "We're talking to Sen. Mary Jo White (R-21) and Rep. Scott Hutchinson (R-64th) and urging their passage of this budget. Pass it, and let us show you what can happen."

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