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Education funding could mean big changes

By Dena Pauling

Directors of pre-kindergarten programs across Centre County say they are ecstatic over state lawmakers' agreement to keep \$75 million -- some of which they hope will make its way here -- in the state budget for early childhood development.

Several local centers had lobbied on behalf of the initiative and applied for some of that money through a competitive grant process. If they are approved, the money would mean sweeping expansions of local pre-K programs.

"I'm just glad it passed," said Wendy Whitesell, director of the Bennett Family Center at Penn State. "The opportunities are going to begin to grow for pre-K altogether. That in itself is glory enough."

Bennett Family Center -- along with St. Paul's Christian Preschool, Daybridge Child Development Center, Child Development Lab school and Learning Station, all of State College -- collaborated to apply for a \$1.9 million grant. Each center submitted plans for using the extra money. Among the priorities are to help English-language learners, make programs more affordable for families, train teachers and increase salaries.

"We have teachers throughout the county making \$7 to \$8 per hour. It's just not right," Whitesell said. "We certainly wanted to be sure to have better wages to increase the staff quality, and that's one of the biggest indicators of quality child care."

Cen-Clear Child Services, a Philipsburg company operating children's programs in Centre and Clearfield counties, also applied. Directors there declined to comment until they know if Cen-Clear is a grant recipient.

Pre-K Today, a statewide coalition formed to advocate for early childhood initiatives, estimates that \$75 million will benefit 11,000 3- and 4-year-olds next school year. Even if no local centers benefit, local directors said they are pleased the state is making early childhood education a priority.

"It's just telling us that they are beginning to value the importance of it," said Lynda Mussi, director of the Learning Station.

Mussi's center has been in business for more than two decades, and she cannot recall any state investment in pre-K of this size in the past.

"A lot of local child care centers banded together, wrote letters to legislators," she said. "This was a huge push for anybody who is involved in early education. It was a big initiative. I am so excited."

Cindy Shultz, director of St. Paul's Christian Preschool, said in an earlier interview that kindergarten programs at public schools have changed dramatically. Research now shows brain development is occurring much younger than originally understood, she said, making it "very important for people to get involved in early intervention and early education."

"Pre-K gives children time to socialize with their peers and teachers who are not familiar to them. They also start learning about academics and values and, especially here, we talk about being kind to others and working together," Shultz said. "Building that communication really provides a good base for them to go to kindergarten, to reach within their community outside their home."

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