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Local pre-K centers to grow

By Dena Pauling

Seven local early childhood centers will expand and start recruiting dozens more 3- and 4-year-old children from Bald Eagle to Philipsburg to pre-kindergarten this fall.

The centers learned this month that they received part of the state's \$75 million in pre-kindergarten funding. Exact numbers were not available Monday, but the amount awarded to centers in the county is expected to exceed \$1.25 million, according to preliminary figures provided by center directors.

"I think it will really enhance learning for children throughout the state," said Sam Walker, executive administrator for the Child Development & Family Council of Centre County Inc., a recipient of a grant of about \$250,000. "I am just thrilled we got as many grants as we did in Centre County. I think that is surprising."

The greatest local impact will be felt through Philipsburg-based Cen-Clear Child Services. Cen-Clear received almost \$700,000 and is planning to expand pre-K programs at four locations -- Wingate Elementary and Matternville Preschool in Bald Eagle, Bellefonte Elementary School and Philipsburg Elementary School.

"We specifically did not apply in State College Area because there were a number of applicants in that area," said Cen-Clear Executive Director Gene Kephart.

"We wanted to reach out to those children on the outlying areas of State College," added Amy Wible, child development coordinator.

She said Cen-Clear plans to hire additional staff, enough so each classroom has one head teacher and an assistant. And the pre-K program will be free for families.

"Our thrust was to coordinate the instruction with children from the pre-K level as they move into kindergarten in the elementary schools and make it a connected behavior," Kephart said.

Bennett Family Center, St. Paul's Christian Preschool, Daybridge Child Development Center, Child Development Lab school and Learning Station, all of State College, applied together and received about \$330,200.

Linda Reichert, director of the Daybridge center, said the grant will be split evenly, based on how many children each center will serve. The centers had applied for \$1.9 million, but were pleased to receive even part of that amount.

"We were under the impression that we didn't know if it was going to pass or if Centre County would be counted as a need," she said. "We are obviously very excited and didn't want to turn it down."

Some of the money will be used to hire a pre-K coordinator. Other funds will be put toward teacher salaries and supplies -- "every center has different needs," Reichert said.

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