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State grant called boon to pre-school industry

By JUDITH O. ETZEL



Photo by Jerry Sowden - Madison Cornelius, 5, (from left) Jackson Donovan, 5, and Abby Joseph, 5, play with building blocks together during their after lunch playtime at the Child Development Center's Cranberry location Wednesday afternoon.

Describing a new infusion of money into Pennsylvania's pre-kindergarten programs as "the best deal that ever happened in our industry," Rina Nerlich of Child Development Centers Inc. in Venango County is hustling to get ready for a lot more youngsters.

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

Last week, Nerlich, now in her 10th year as executive director of Child Development Centers, was notified the Department of Education has awarded a \$733,550 grant to expand the educational programs for 4 year olds in Venango County.

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The grant is part of Gov. Ed Rendell's \$75 million Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts Initiative that was plugged into the state budget. All four Venango County school districts are included in the grant coverage that will offer full-day care and development/education services to 4 year olds.

The Oil City Area School District will receive funding for 34 slots - 17 will be open at the Child Care Development Center in Hasson Heights and the other 17 are earmarked for the Head Start program.

Nerlich's agency applied for the grant on behalf of the remaining three districts, Franklin, Cranberry and Valley Grove. The funding will provide 51 full-day openings at Child Development Centers and 17 half-day slots at the Franklin YMCA.

Typically, enrollment in the Child Development Centers would cost a family \$6,700 per four-year old for a full-day program for one full year. While there are some stipends and other assistance available, the sum is hard for many families as well as single parents to pay, Nerlich said.

The state grant will considerably lessen that amount for 4-year-olds.

"The new funding lets us target families that are at 300 percent of the poverty rate - a family of four making \$50,000 to \$60,000 - and provide free pre-school for their four-year-olds," Nerlich said.

The Pre-K Counts program, in place in 59 of Pennsylvania's 67 counties, is designated for children 4 years old who are at risk of school failure, have special needs or who are in families within the income guidelines. Those guidelines are stretched wider than the federal poverty level and that opens up enrollment to include a much larger segment of the public.

Nerlich is a strong believer in offering youngsters the skills they need before they enter kindergarten. Enrollment in the Child Development Centers, said Nerlich, gives children "a strong early start and a better chance at success in school." Several states, she said, have universal and free pres-school programs in place.

The expanded program for four-year-olds, said Nerlich, will start in October. One advantage that the Child Development Center network has is sufficient space to accommodate more children.

Families interested in applying for the new, free-of-charge classroom spots for 4-year-olds should contact Martha Hoover at the Child Development Center office at 437-7288 or e-mail her at mhoover@cdcenters.org.

"The grant is for one year but we are hopeful it will be a long-term item in the Pennsylvania budget," Nerlich said. "It is a wonderful initiative and one that has a big impact in our county."