

Lewiston Tribune, January 11, 2010

By: Kerri Sandaine

Will early education survive cuts?

Area programs that serve 'neediest of the needy' are among looming cuts

Four-year-old Hunter Gray thinks preschool is a blast.

Whether he's stacking blocks or eating lunch with his classmates, he's having a good time in the Lewis-Clark Early Childhood Program at Clarkston's Parkway Center. What he and the other kids may not realize is they're also learning some important social and academic skills designed to prepare them for kindergarten.

"He thinks he is just playing, but he's also getting a great education" said Hunter's mother, Anna Gray, of Clarkston. "He loves school and he loves his teachers. It really is an awesome program."

She and others are hoping the program will be spared from the budget ax looming at the state level. The family-focused preschool, which is partially funded through the state's Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program, is one of the items on Gov. Chris Gregoire's all-cuts budget.

"It would be a huge loss to the community, if funding gets cut" Gray said.

Centers throughout the region, including five counties in Idaho, serve the "neediest of the needy" through programs designed to strengthen families and prepare children for lifelong learning, said Dorlan Hergesheimer, executive director of Lewis-Clark Early Childhood Program. Most of the families earn less than the federal poverty guidelines, some have special needs, and all have children between the ages of birth and 5.

Early Childhood Education and Assistance Programs are offered in three Clarkston locations, including Highland and Grantham elementary schools. Those centers would feel the pinch of cuts on the table in Olympia, Hergesheimer said.

If the cuts are made, funding in Asotin County would be decreased by about \$280,000, and services for all 3-year-olds would be eliminated, which would affect almost 40 kids in Asotin County and six staff members.

"I'm dismayed we're in this predicament" he said. "It's hard to find who to blame. It's unfortunate if kids have to pay the price."

Hergesheimer said the preschool programs are especially important in Asotin County, where there are special needs, according to community assessments conducted by Lewis-Clark Early Childhood Program.

Compared to some surrounding areas, Asotin County has a higher rate of unplanned teenage births and low birth-weight babies, more kids dropping out of high school and more child abuse and neglect, he said. In addition, the percentage of people living in poverty is higher, along with the number of students in special education.

The program assists younger parents and helps move families out of poverty, which is a benefit to society, he said.

“It’s vital to kids” Hergesheimer said. “Their lives will be impacted if there are cuts. Statistics show kids who go through the program do better in life.”

The free preschool is offered four days a week to kids who qualify. In addition to education, children are screened for health and dental issues and brought up to date on immunizations. A full meal is served each day, along with healthy snacks.

“We address their most basic needs so they are prepared to learn” said Alice Weaver, associate director of Lewis-Clark Early Childhood Program.

The state is experiencing a high demand for the services. According to the Washington State Association of Head Start and ECEAP, the waiting list has increased 50 percent in the past year.

“The biggest aspect is the social-emotional learning” said Janette Musson, a family and children’s services supervisor in Clarkston. “If they’re ready to learn, the school district can get them there academically.”

Gray, a stay-at-home mother, said the child-friendly learning environment and focused curriculum have definitely benefited Hunter.

“He was really good at counting before, but now his letter recognition has gone up 10-fold and he can write his name. He loves the social aspect of school, and I love the feeling of being able to come in anytime and help out.”

She and her husband, Scott, who is employed in Lewiston, have two other boys, Zakary, 8, and Taylor, 1. Gray is crossing her fingers that the program is still going strong when her youngest turns 3.

“I can’t wait until Taylor is old enough to go there” she said. “The teachers really care about each and every kid, and they make sure their individual needs are being met.”

Sandaine may be contacted at kerris@lmtribune.com or (208) 848-2264.