King's aims to give college students child care experience

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by Mark Guydish

WILKES-BARRE - Robbie Ritinski and Aiden Monaco didn't look as if they were in a lab, though they could have been conducting a behavioral experiment. Aiden kept plopping his pointless scissors into Robbie's plastic cup, and Robbie kept removing them. The giggles grew so frequent they verged on belly laughs.

But the tots were in a lab of sorts, one where adults, not children, learn.

Funded for five years with a $173,000 PNC Bank grant, the King's College Early Childhood Training Institute established a child care laboratory classroom at the King's/St. Mary's center, to give college students majoring in early childhood and elementary education real-world experience.

The institute's biggest goal is to improve the amount and quality of training day care workers and administrators have. Though the intent was to start small with the King's/St. Mary's center, it has grown so rapidly that about 25 preschool centers are currently involved, and supervisor Heather Critchosin expects another 12 or 15 to be on board soon.

"We found a wide need, so we expanded it to all interested centers," Critchosin said. "We meet with directors and provide training and support."

The biggest training event, the annual Quality Care Conference, was held Saturday at King's Sheehy-Farmer Campus Center. Attendants had their choice of 48 presentations throughout the day. The conference in 2006 drew about 170 people; more than 350 attended Saturday's event.

The conference, like most projects done by the institute, is geared to help preschool centers join and progress through the state's voluntary Keystone Stars program, devised to increase the quality of day care through a star rating system. The better trained a staff is, the more stars the center earns.

Of about 150 centers in Luzerne County, Critchosin said, roughly half are in the Keystone Stars program, and only a handful are at the three or four star (highest) level. Critchosin runs her own center in Butler Township.

Critchosin is quick and passionate in pointing out that studies show every dollar spent on quality day care saves society up to $17 later in life by decreasing the odds those students will need remedial education in school or turn to a life of crime or dependency on welfare as adults.

A forthcoming report by the Economic Policy Institute estimates that Pennsylvania's economy overall would reap a benefit of nearly $10 billion by 2050 if quality pre-kindergarten was available for the most at-risk children.

Is the King's program working here?

"Absolutely" said Lauren Ritinski, director of the King's/St. Mary's Day Care. Having a high Keystone Star rating is a strong selling point, and being a lab for King's means the center gets to recruit students about to graduate.

That's what happened with Lisa Schroeder, "Miss Lisa" to Aiden, Robbie and their table mates.

"I was going to do elementary education," Schroeder said, "but I came here a year ago and I fell in love with it." She expects to work at the center after graduating.

As to the little people who theoretically get the most from this, they seemed blissfully unaware of all the money and fuss committed to them. When they weren't cutting straws and slipping the pieces onto pipe cleaners to make friendship bracelets, they were poking hands into the little individual wood "cubbies" where lollipops and other items had been stored, or running around the table, or just clowning with each other until the next project began.

"Miss Lisa, I'm done!" Robbie said, proudly holding up his straw-beaded pipe cleaner.

"Do you want to wear it?" she asked.

"Noooooo!" Robbie howled with a smile.

Then Aiden plopped his scissors into Robbie's cup. And the game began.

What's next?

The institute and a bus full of supporters will travel to Harrisburg May 8 to show support for Gov. Ed Rendell's

proposed "Pre-K Counts" plan to put $75 million into the state budget to help more children attend pre-K centers. Those interested can contact Critchosin at 208-5900 ext. 5606.

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