



Clark County
Officials study how to teach kids under 5

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The year was 1973, and Laurie Dolan was a new teacher, facing a classroom of first-graders at one of Spokane's poorest schools.

Among them was a boy who couldn't speak or communicate. Dolan sent him to an audiologist, who reported back that the boy had been deaf since birth. When Dolan told the boy's mother, the mother said she hadn't known.

What upset Dolan most was that the boy had gone six years without social services or early education, or anybody's noticing that he was deaf.

"He's never heard; he has no language," Dolan said. "Here I am, 21 years old, and I have to teach this kid how to read by the end of the year. He can't even name his body parts."

Fast-forward to 2007. Dolan is now the director of policy for Gov. Chris Gregoire, and among those pushing for pre-kindergarten education. Her career has evolved since those early days in Spokane, but birth-to-5 education continues to lag.

Last year, the governor's office teamed up with major philanthropies - most notably, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation - to launch an initiative to get Washington kids ready for kindergarten. The initiative, called Thrive by Five, plans pilot programs in Yakima and West Seattle.

Dolan said they wanted to build programs that would last. As an educator, she's seen programs rise and fall because of limited grant monies.

"The governor knew she couldn't do this through the public sector," Dolan said.

Readiness

In Washington, 50 percent of kindergartners aren't ready for school. Being ready isn't knowing how to read, necessarily, but about the basic stuff - knowing how to stand in line, listen to a teacher and hold a pair of scissors.

That's because there's no public-sector system for early learning, says Valisa Smith, a senior program officer at the Gates Foundation. Of the 2,100 child-care centers in the state, 150 are nationally accredited. Of those, 20 are in low-income neighborhoods.

Three years ago, Smith was mulling over potential projects.

"We know that those early years are such a rapid time for brain growth," Smith said. "The kids who start kindergarten and are behind will likely stay behind. They're the kids who drop out in high school."

The Gates Foundation compared Washington with Minnesota, which has similar demographics.

"They were doing so much better than us," Smith said. "We think of ourselves as such a progressive state, but the image of ourselves as a state wasn't meeting with national standards."

Little time talking to adults

In December, 2006, Thrive hired Graciela Italiano-Thomas, former CEO of Los Angeles Universal Pre-school, to head the effort.

Within months, Italiano-Thomas dispatched a small team on a tour of Washington day cares. In early July, she visited three sites in Vancouver.

She assessed whether children were calm and dynamic and whether adults were attentive.

"I saw children playing in water at tables, with flour and sand, with measuring cups, discussing among themselves," Italiano-Thomas said.

But she also saw "children playing on their own and adults being present but not engaging or even observing children."

Caregivers told Italiano-Thomas that they wanted more training. Center directors said they wish they could pay benefits, to improve staff retention.

Low pay results in turnover, which affects the children, she said.

"Too many adults in one year caring for a 2-year-old forces the child to go through too much emotional upheaval," Italiano-Thomas said.

At the local Educational Service District, Associate Superintendent Jada Rupley agrees that day-care workers should be paid more. Still, she worries.

"Once they have teaching degrees and bachelor's degrees, will they stay?" Rupley asked. "We know that K-12 is always looking for teachers."

In Clark County, child-care workers who are part of the Southwest Child Care Consortium receive medical benefits, but pay is low. Teachers earn between \$8.50 and \$10.75 an hour. Directors earn between \$11 and \$18.50, depending on the center's size.

Evaluating providers

In a survey of 600 parents, 80 percent of respondents said they would like a child-care rating system. The Legislature gave the state's Department of Early Learning \$5 million to design and test a rating system. Child-care providers will choose whether to participate.

Italiano-Thomas said she hopes in 10 years, her job will be done, and that Washington politicians will emphasize early education.

"Until a society knows how to take care of its young children," she said, "we're not quite sure if it's civilized yet."

Thrive by Five: thrivebyfivewa.org

The Department of Early Learning's ratings: www.del.wa.gov

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