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Prekindergarten falls victim to budget cuts

By Denise G. Callahan, Staff Writer

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More than 400 children in Warren County will be affected by the loss of a prekindergarten program because of state budget cuts.

The Early Learning Initiative is a higher quality educational program that helps underprivileged 3-and 4-year-olds prepare for school.

The state sent out a letter to parents whose children are enrolled in the ELI program, informing them that the services, as they exist today, will cease on Aug. 22. However, all might not be lost, according to the letter.

“Many children served through ELI will be able to continue to receive financial assistance through Ohio’s Subsidized Child Care Program,” the letter reads. “In many cases, your child may be able to continue services at the same location where he/she is participating in ELI.”

According to Lisa Cayard, the Head Start director with Warren County Community Services, there are several child care centers who contract or sub-contract to operate ELI classrooms. She said it is a real loss for these families, who had been getting higher quality educational programs for their children.

“There are families that are able to get really high quality, early education programs that allows them to work,” she said. “There’s a lot of families in Warren County that are employed in service kinds of jobs that are lower paying and maybe not full-time. They can at least be self sufficient and have an income, but they can’t afford child care.”

Creston Schmidt, with the county’s Human Services Department, said these families may be eligible for other subsidized child care, but it won’t be the same as the ELI program. Both parents must have jobs and co-pays — based on the number of children in the family and income — will be required.

“There will be some families who did not have a co-pay who will now have a co-pay, there will be some families that are not eligible at all,” she said. “There was a higher needs standard for the ELI program and some did not have a co-pay. Once they apply for subsidized child care, then some of them will have a co-pay.”

Morrow resident Jessica Helton said her son, Hunter, now 5 and going into kindergarten, was diagnosed with ADHD and received all the tools he needed from ELI to get ready for kindergarten. She predicts dire results from the budget cuts.

“A lot of people are going to lose their jobs, especially single parents, because they aren’t going to be able to find anyone to watch their kids,” she said. “Nobody is hiring now and you can’t get assistance because they are taking it all away.”

Commissioner Pat South said the county is looking at all the human services the state budget affects and then will prioritize to see if there is a way, and desire, they might contribute some local dollars.

Commissioner Mike Kilburn says he’s hated programs like ELI all along and he’s glad to see them go.

“The reason the state of Ohio has a problem right now is because we’ve got too many of these early childhood programs and these fluffy, feel good social programs,” he said.

“The state doesn’t have a revenue problem; it has a spending problem. You can’t have a program for every hang nail problem in society.”

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