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Budget victims

Many of Ohio's poorest children won't get the benefits of early education because of state cuts

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BY **RITA PRICE**

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

At age 3, the boy's development was so delayed that teachers had to use materials designed for 12- to 24-month-olds to assess his abilities.

The staff at the South Side Learning and Development Center on Reeb Avenue worked closely with the child for 10 months to get him caught up. Now, teachers can only wonder how he spends his days.

The loss of the state Early Learning Initiative program is a gut punch to centers such as South Side, where enrollment recently plummeted from 86 to 36 boys and girls.

"Everybody keeps asking, 'Where are the children?' " said Executive Director Roberta Bishop, her eyes filling with tears. "It's heartbreaking, because I know we made a difference."

The full-day education program for low-income preschoolers ended Aug. 22, and child-care centers and families are beginning to feel the effect of the state cutbacks.

Franklin County had about 1,400 Early Learning Initiative slots for 3- to 5-year-olds. Supporters say they fear hundreds of those children, many of whom come from impoverished and undereducated families, will wind up with no early-childhood education options at all.

While the Early Learning Initiative slots were available to low-income families regardless of work status, subsidized child care generally is approved only for low-income parents who are employed, in a training program or enrolled in school. And the state has lowered the income limits for that subsidy, dropping it from 200 to 150 percent of the poverty level.



JEFF HINCKLEY | DISPATCH

Snack time is a fun time for Mi'Ajia Murray, 4, left, and Bradley Damuth, 4, at the South Side Learning and Development Center on Reeb Avenue. A loss of state funding has caused enrollment to plummet.

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"Until we figure all this out, enrollment falls," said Ron Sams of the Children's Academy on the South Side.

About 170 of the 300 children who had been enrolled at his school were in the Early Learning Initiative program, and maybe 100 or so will be able to receive subsidized care, he said.

He doesn't know what becomes of the others.

"All around the state, about 12,000 of these kids were onboard, and they've been dumped out of the boat," he said. "I don't think legislators had any idea what this program was doing. I don't think the governor knew."

Supporters of the abolished program say there aren't enough openings in other low-income programs to fill the gap. Increased federal money for Early Head Start, for example, is for younger children in part-time programs.

Debra L. Brown said she has no options for her 3-year-old daughter, Ta-Nijah, who has been attending a Creative Child Care center on the East Side. Brown applied for subsidized care when she learned the Early Learning program would end, but she was denied because she isn't employed.

She also is blind.

"They can give my daughter things that I can't," Brown said of center teachers. "She knows shapes, colors -- she's really blossomed. She helps me put colors together."

Diane Bennett, chief executive officer of Action for Children, said area centers have pooled some money to keep some children on through December.

After that, she doesn't have an answer. "I would hope that the legislators and the administration, through an economic upturn, would make this a priority."

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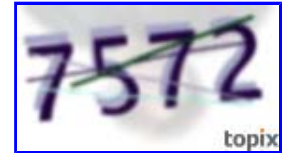
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