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## Preschool cuts devastate parents

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When the Early Learning Initiative was axed from the state budget, it sent thousands of parents scrambling for an alternative to the full-day, year-round preschool for low-income working families.

But some families make too much money for Head Start, a federally funded preschool program. Even if they qualify, Head Start is only a half-day program, and slots are filled in some areas.

Families can seek state vouchers for subsidized child care, but those come with higher co-pays than the Early Learning Initiative (ELI) program, and both parents must be working.

"When you're not used to paying anything or paying very little, and all of a sudden having to go from paying \$50 (per month) to paying \$250, that is a major impact. We all have to budget for that," said Berta Velilla, director of the Early Childhood Division at Child Focus in Eastgate.

It's been a struggle, because from the time the state budget was passed in mid-July until ELI funding ends today, there's been precious little time for parents to either budget or find new child care arrangements for their 3- to 5-year-olds.

"We have parents calling every day that are just panic-stricken," said Lisa Cayard, director of the Early Learning Centers at Warren County Community Services. "It's really hitting them that they don't have options. They're calling us and crying, because they don't know what to do."

Many families are still in the midst of making difficult decisions.

Shawna Luhosky of Eastgate is studying to be a nurse at UC-Clermont, but is still struggling to find a spot for her two preschool-age children.

"I may have to drop out of school," Luhosky said. "It's a huge deal. I've cried and cried."

"The ELI program allowed me to have time for tutoring and studying. I could go full force and do my classes ... It's just sad that it's gone. It really helped the people who were trying to make it. The government isn't set up to help people achieve."

As a result of the state budget cut, Child Focus in Clermont County closed six classrooms that served 300 children. The family services agency lost \$3.1 million and laid off 18 people.

Hamilton County Educational Service Center served 600 children in 12 classrooms. The budget took a \$3.5 million hit, and 34 employees were laid off.

At Warren County Community Services, ELI served 40 children in two classrooms. The agency lost \$380,000, but has avoided layoffs, so far, because of attrition.

Butler County Educational Service Center runs the ELI program in that county, but information was not available Friday.

Educators worry that the quality of early childhood education will suffer. ELI teachers had associate's or bachelor's degrees in early childhood education.

"Right off the bat, you're talking about a quality teacher in that classroom," said Jack Collopy, executive director of Early Learning Programs at the Hamilton County Educational Service Center.

"Now you go on the child care side, the teacher in the classroom could have a high school diploma, could have one year of college. All they have to do is meet licensing requirements."

ELI children also were exposed to the early childhood content standards that were aligned with Ohio Department of Education's K-12 standards.

"The state has a lot of data that proves that children, from the beginning until the end of the program year, made tremendous gains in the skills that they learned," Velilla said.

Educators also are concerned about losing that small window of opportunity in which research shows most of the brain is developed by age 5.

"I think the schools are going to see children entering into their kindergarten classrooms without having been exposed to social experiences, getting along with other peers and without the basic skills that they need to succeed in kindergarten," Velilla said.

Collopy fears children will be moving into child care arrangements where early childhood education isn't a priority or resources aren't available to provide such learning.

"Ohio has always been a leader in early childhood. They're not going to be anymore."

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