

State cuts slam door on preschool program

Early Learning Initiative helped 3- and 4-year-olds get ready for school.

By Margo Rutledge Kissell, Staff Writer

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Tina Maynard's 4-year-old daughter, Cindy, thrived at Mini University, the child development center at Wright State University where she spent the last year learning to read and write and making new friends.

But on Monday, Aug. 24, the Miamisburg girl has to go to a different child care facility.

Cindy was among more than 12,000 children across the state who were part of the Early Learning Initiative (ELI). The preschool program was aimed at preparing low income 3- and 4-year-olds for kindergarten, while meeting the child care needs of working families by giving them a break on the cost.

ELI — a partnership between the Ohio Department of Education and the state's Department of Job and Family Services since 2004 — came to an end Friday, Aug. 21, after funding ran out.

That has forced parents, including those of more than 525 children in Montgomery County, to scramble to find alternative child care.

Area child care officials said they expect most of those children to qualify for subsidized child care, but another 170 likely will not.

Deb Downing, assistant director of Montgomery County Job and Family Services' Social Services and Income Support Division, said they sent letters to all families who had children in ELI informing them of the program ending and urging them to apply for subsidized child care by Aug. 21.

But by Friday, only 231 of the 525 children in ELI were approved for subsidized child care, said Vary Welch, administrator of the child care program at the Montgomery County Department of Job and Family Services.

Friday's deadline was key for ELI participants to be grandfathered in at 200 percent of federal poverty guidelines. New subsidized child care rules require applications be evaluated at 150 percent starting Monday. For instance, a single parent with one child can make \$12.50 an hour and qualify, compared with \$18 an hour previously, Welch noted.

"It's going to kind of eliminate the working folks who have the potential to pay," he said.

Child care centers hit by lost funding

Child care providers in Montgomery County have lost \$5.8 million in ELI funding, which forced layoffs at some centers.

Mini University, headquartered in Beavercreek, was the largest provider of the ELI preschool readiness initiative in this area. The \$2 million it received covered 250 children at its six child-care centers, president Julie Thorner said.

ELI was originally created using more than \$200 million in surplus federal welfare money. While that was slated to run out this year, the state planned to put \$125 million toward the program but that was wiped

out by a tight budget.

About 99 agencies operating more than 600 child care centers received ELI funding and child-care officials have estimated as many as 25 percent of those centers could close.

In the Dayton area, 56 centers in Montgomery, Greene, Warren, Clark, Preble and Miami counties received ELI funding, according to Sallie Westheimer, executive director of 4C ... for Children, a child care resource and referral agency with an office in Dayton. Nearly all of the 56 centers also receive funding for Head Start, the federal preschool program, so Westheimer said she doesn't expect a lot of closings in this area.

Still, she has seen about 2,500 child-care slots lost in the last seven months in her agency's 23-county region. She attributes the losses to the recession prompting families to find other child care, including using family and friends. She said more slots could disappear as a result of the lost ELI funding.

Kelli Casto, office assistant at the Troy Kids Learning Place, said that the Miami County child care center will remain open but it closed its ELI classroom.

"It's been pretty emotional around here," said Casto, a single mom who had two sons participate in the ELI program.

Her son Carter Denman, 5, is moving on to full-time kindergarten at Piqua Catholic School.

She said the program, for which she paid no fees, succeeded in getting both her boys ready for school.

It also helped her get her degree and find a good job.

"If I had to pay \$480 a month in child care," she said, "there is no way I could have done that. No way."

A time of transition

Maynard and her husband feel fortunate they found a space for Cindy in a child development center at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, where Tina works for a contractor.

"We were very lucky to get in there because normally there is a waiting list," she said.

Maynard said going from paying nothing for Cindy's child care to about \$130 a week (or \$520 per month) will be a strain on the family's budget. Still, it's less than what it would have cost if Cindy remained at the child development center on the Wright State campus.

At that Mini University location, 38 children attended under the ELI program.

Half of those children are moving on to kindergarten. Six other children, including Cindy, had to find new child care.

Director Kim Kramer was still waiting to see how many other children qualify for subsidized child care.

Kramer said the lost ELI funding has caused "great upheaval" there in recent weeks. Three teachers had to be let go and more layoffs are possible, she said.

But the hardest part is knowing some children now may not get the high quality preschool education they need to prepare them for kindergarten, she added.

"That's the most devastating loss."

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