

October 10, 2005

W.Va. leads and lags in early childhood education

By **Scott Finn**
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There's good news and bad news about early childhood education in West Virginia.

The state has one of the best programs for 4-year-olds in the country, according to speakers Sunday at the West Virginia Policy Forum. The event concludes today at the Clay Center and is sponsored by the Vision Shared business group.

More than 7,000 children — 38 percent of the state's 4-year-olds — participate in the voluntary program, said state schools Superintendent Steve Paine.

But people who care for children under 4 earn poverty wages, said Kay Tilton, director of child-care services for the state Department of Health and Human Resources.

"Those workers earn less than parking lot attendants," Tilton said. "We can't wait until children turn 4. So please support the programs for younger children as well."

In 2002, the state Legislature passed a bill requiring all school systems to educate 4-year-olds by 2012.

It almost didn't happen, said the bill's sponsor, former Senate Education Chairman Lloyd Jackson, D-Lincoln. It was the last bill passed on the last night of the Legislature.

Even after it passed, the pre-K program faced yearly threats from former House Education Chairman Jerry Mezzatesta, D-Hampshire. Eastern Panhandle schools like those in Hampshire County have struggled to find room for the preschoolers.

The program survived, Jackson said, thanks in part to Senate Education Chairman Bob Plymale, D-Wayne. Most counties have embraced the preschool program, which cost taxpayers \$39 million last year and is expected to cost \$60 million when fully implemented.

The pre-K program has won national honors for its quality, ranking sixth in one study and first overall for the caliber of its teachers.

When the state gained a 4-year-old program, former Gov. Bob Wise dropped a broader effort called Educare to improve education for children from birth to age 5.

Educare had worked for several years to improve training and develop standards for all early childhood caregivers in schools, day-care centers and private homes.

Jackson said state officials should revive Educare or something like it to improve education in the earliest years.

Tilton pleaded for more money for child care in general. Right now, only the very poorest families, those up to 132 percent of the poverty level, qualify for child-care subsidies from the state. Most other state programs serve families up to at least 150 percent of the poverty level, she said.

Also, the reimbursement rates of state-subsidized day care are too low, she said, leading to poor salaries for child-care workers.

Child care aides make an average of \$15,000 a year, and preschool teachers an average of \$18,600, according to a study released at the event Sunday. Only about one-quarter of child care providers offered health insurance.

It's hard to keep experienced and well-trained staff at those wages, said Calvin Kent, the study's author and vice president for business and economic research at Marshall University.

Quality preschool programs are the best economic development investment the state can make, he said.

The state receives \$5 back for every \$1 it spends on early childhood, according to the study. "And those are very

conservative estimates," Kent said.

Almost 30,000 West Virginians with young children would have to quit their jobs were it not for early childhood programs. Those parents earn about \$1 billion a year, Kent said.

Children in quality preschool programs are more successful in school and in their jobs. They are also less likely to need welfare or end up in prison, according to the report, which summarized several long-term studies.

There's one big problem with the current system, said Margie Hale, director of West Virginia Kids Count. No one knows the quality of preschool education for children younger than 4.

"Quality is the key to achieving good outcomes for children and economic returns for all of us," Hale said. "The good news is we know what quality is and how to get it. The bad news is we don't yet have it."

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