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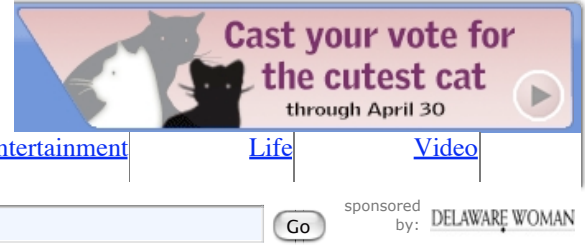
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New plea for child-care funding boost

 By *JAMES MERRIWEATHER, The News Journal*

Posted Thursday, April 26, 2007 at 3:31 pm

DOVER -- "You have about 1,000 days to build a baby's brain ... to create a reader, a communicator, a learner and a thinker."

That quote, attributed to the University of Delaware Center for Disabilities Studies, was a centerpiece of sorts Thursday for the Kent County Early Childhood Directors Association's 2nd annual legislative breakfast.

The question begged: If such development occurs so early in a child's life, why does 95 percent of the public investment in education come after the critical years from birth to age 5?

As it turned out, the hour-long session was a series of sermons to a choir of four legislators and Gov. Ruth Ann Minner's budget director -- delivered along with fruit chunks, bagels and cream cheese and egg casserole in the basement of St. John's Lutheran Church on Lotus Street in south Dover.

The response was one of warm support, but no assurances were offered that the association's call for more early education funding would be heeded.

"We wish we had unlimited funds," said Rep. Donna Stone, R-Dover South. "The biggest portion of our state budget is spent on education, but it's still not enough."



Kent County Early Childhood Directors Association hosted a lobbying session with legislators at St. John's Lutheran Early Childhood Center. Here, Donna Stone, T-Dover South, reads to 4-year-olds at the school. [\(Buy photo\)](#)

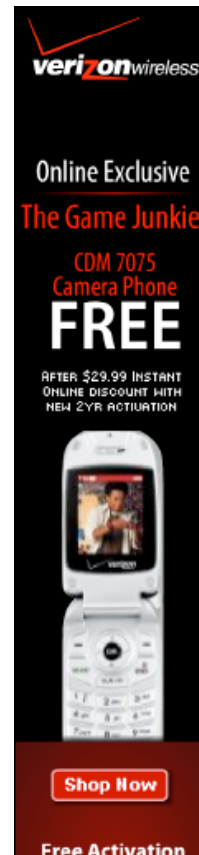
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Noting the ill effects of failing to reach children during the formative years, Sen. Gary Simpson, R-Milford, suggested that educational progress might be better served by diverting money to early education at the expense of Minner's push for statewide full-day kindergarten.

"I think you're the best bang for the buck," Simpson said, posing what he described as a "political question" to about 20 directors of early education and child care and their employees and other guests.

Nobody would discount the value of full-day kindergarten. But the general consensus was that the typical child without early education would be behind on entering kindergarten and, due to mounting frustration, would likely eventually drop out of the educational system.

And that could lead to any number of social maladies -- including special education, stunted earning potential and, in some cases, prison.

"If they are prepared ahead of time, they may be fine with half-day kindergarten," said Lee Anne Jackson, director of Whatcoat Christian Pre-school in Camden.

Jennifer "JJ" Davis, the state budget director, credits a couple of early education providers --the DelTech Child Development Center and St. John's Lutheran Early Learning Center, both in Dover -- with the determination that her 5-year-old daughter, Madelyn, reads at a sixth-grade level.

"It didn't happen because of anything I did," Davis said, adding that early education outside the home also fosters socialization skills that flow from mingling with other children in a diverse environment.

"It's a real priority for Gov. Minner and myself," she said.

For the budget year that begins July 1, Minner has proposed appropriations of \$28.8 million in general funds and \$2 million in special funds for purchasing child care for mostly poor families.

But the association wants that amount increased by \$5 million, mostly to increase purchase-of-care rates for about 15,000 eligible families served by family facilities licensed for up to 12 children and larger day care facilities.

Evelyn Keating, provider services director for The Family & Workplace Connection, says that, typically, the state reimbursement rates cover only about 66 percent of what a child care provider charges for unsubsidized services.

About 90 percent of providers accept state-subsidized children, she said, but many can afford to take only one or two and others turn them away altogether.

"We have limited the number of purchase-of-care children just because of that," said Ken Richter, a member of St. John Lutheran's school board.

Keating said the shortfall also contributes, she said, to a 30 percent turnover rate among child care employees earning low wages.

"How many businesses can do that?" said Keating, whose nonprofit agency helps families find child and elder care through contracts with the state and federal governments. "DuPont couldn't run with 30 percent turnover each year."

According to a fact card distributed at the breakfast, the average child care teacher in

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Delaware earns \$18,820 for 50 weeks a year. That compares with a 10-month salary of \$50,000 for the average kindergarten teacher.

Kim Pridemore, the association president, said the difference goes a long way toward explaining the turnover rate and why 93 percent of teachers of infants and toddlers have only high school degrees.

"It's hard for our workers to go to school and get degrees because a lot of our jobs have no benefits," said Pridemore, who runs the DelTech Child Development Center.

Reps. Nancy Wagner, R-North, and Robert Walls, D-Milford, also attended the breakfast, which was hosted by Dottie Kringel of St. John's Lutheran Early Learning Center. Afterwards, Simpson and Stone accepted an invitation to read to children at the center, which is next door to the church.

A more sweeping effort to win more money for early childhood education will come on May 16, dubbed as Early Childhood Education Advocacy Day. Advocates from around the state will descend on Legislative Hall to take up their cause with members of the Joint Finance Committee, the legislature's budget-writing arm.

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