



October 20, 2008 (Editorial)

UD's new institute is a gift to early childhood education in Delaware

The creation of an early childhood education program at the University of Delaware is a godsend to many licensed and unlicensed day care workers.

Often their care is provided under the radar of academic excellence and availability of research-based methods that get infants and toddlers ready for the formal education process.

In Delaware, 93 percent of infant and toddler teachers and 58 percent of teachers of children ages 3 to 5 only have a high school education; some lack literacy skills beyond a sixth-grade level.

The Department of Education's \$2.4 million award to create the center is paramount. The state has a vested interest in welcoming pre-schoolers and kindergartners, who are socially, mentally and academically up to the challenge of beginning life-long learning.

The Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood will provide professional development opportunities. Through workshops, seminars and courses, the institute has plans to serve a wide class of practitioners such as early interventionists and those who work with children with disabilities.

The institute opens in less than two weeks and plans to offer courses that will give college credit to educators seeking bachelor's or master's degrees.

A majority of the \$2.4 million will come from the federal Child Care Development Fund and be distributed over the next three years. The institute will be housed in the university's Center for Disabilities Study, and UD is in the process of hiring a director and other staff members.

As a clearinghouse, the institute should be able to quickly identify duplicative or unnecessary services.

While research confirms that professional development is critical to improving quality of care and education, many workers are paid poorly and their low incomes prevent them from gaining access for the basics of academic training to improve their skills.

The collaborative efforts of the institute should yield resources and creative opportunities for these workers to transition from baby-sitting services to becoming early learning providers.

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