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By Yesenia Amaro Daily News staff writer  
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Mary Tatham said she is concerned that money for the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program could be slashed from Washington's budget.

Tatham is the executive director for the Community Child Care Center, a Pullman nonprofit organization that provides programs such as the ECEAP, Head Start and public childcare. She said the state-funded ECEAP preschool program is modeled after Head Start, a federal preschool program that provides early education assistance for low-income children and families.

Tatham said the nonprofit has partnerships with six school districts in Whitman County to offer the ECEAP preschool program. The school districts include Palouse, Garfield, Endicott, St. John, Rosalia and Tekoa.

The program serves a total of 111 children countywide. Forty-one of them are in Pullman and are served through the Community Child Care Center.

Ten percent of the 111 slots are reserved for children who come from upper-income families and who have been identified as being at "risk developmentally or at risk environmentally."

Tatham said the program serves 3- and 4-year-olds but gives prioritization to 4-year-olds. Under Gov. Chris Gregoire's initial budget-balancing proposal, funding for all 3-year-olds was eliminated, which would have translated to anywhere from 1,500 to 1,600 fewer slots for children statewide.

Even though Gregoire restored funding for the program in her second budget-balancing proposal, Tatham said the program still could experience cuts due to difficult financial times like the one the state is currently facing.

She said if funding for the ECEAP is eliminated, it would be "detrimental for the smaller communities."

"In the smaller communities the parents depend on the school districts to provide the service," she said.

Tatham said the ECEAP used to serve only 70 children in Whitman County, but it was expanded over three years.

"It's about a (38-percent) increase, and we still have kids on the waiting list," she said.

The demand for the program has not only increased in Whitman County, but also throughout the state, she said.

Over the past two years, the waiting lists for the program increased by 263 percent. About 3,540 children statewide are not able to enroll due to limited funding.

"It's a record high," she said. "The economic downturn has increased the demand for programs like this."

Community Child Care Center Family Advocate Donna Gwinn said the parents are involved in all aspects of ECEAP, so they also benefit from the program.

Gwinn provides parents with home visits to help them establish goals for their children. There are also monthly meetings where the parents get to discuss an educational topic of their choice.

"It's better practice to meet with the families," she said. "You get to know them better."

Tatham said the goal of the program is to get the parents involved in their children's educational process.

"The more involved, the more successful these kids are going to be," she said.

She said the program is like a "safety net" for the working-poor families. Gwinn said the program also offers health, nutrition and mental health services for the children and families.

"We'll be really hurt to not have that program," Gwinn said.

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