

Early Childhood Caucus Community Forums 2005



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Sen. John Hottinger, Rep. Connie Ruth, Rep. Nora Slawik, Sen. Dick Day, Rep. Patti Fritz, Rep. Ray Cox, and Mike Thorsteinson (facilitator) at the first forum in Faribault.

Many thanks from the organizer....

The Early Childhood Caucus hosted a second year of community forums this fall. In 2004, forums were held in 14 different cities throughout Minnesota. With funding from The Sheltering Arms Foundation, the Caucus was able to continue this effort and plan community forums in 8 cities in 2005. The events included 29 different legislators and hundreds of Minnesota citizens. The purpose of the forums was to create a dialogue between legislators and community members about how to continue to support young children and their families. This year was a great success! With half of the number of forums this year as compared to 2004, there were nearly the same total number of community members in attendance, and the number of legislators present actually increased. Without a doubt, interest and involvement in early childhood issues is growing in Minnesota.



Community members speak at Minneapolis forum.

Thank you to the co-chairs of the Early Childhood Caucus (Senators John Hottinger and Claire Robling, and Representatives Doug Meslow and Nora Slawik) for their help in planning and attending the forums. At least one co-chair was present at each of the forums, and this provided a consistent example of leadership and dedication to improving the lives of young children in Minnesota.



Rep Sondra Erickson, Rep Bill Hilty, Sen. Betsy Wergin, and Superintendent Mark Sleeper at Princeton forum.

Thank you to The Sheltering Arms Foundation's Executive Director, Denise Mayotte, and to Ready 4K staff, including Todd Otis, Karen Kingsley, and Andrew Hyser for their vision and assistance. Thank you also to organizations like Child Care WORKS, the Children's Defense Fund Minnesota, and all of the local community organizers for helping to get the word out to their communities.

Lisa Cariveau
Forum Organizer



Rep. Lynn Wardlow, Rep. Rick Hansen, Rep. Tim Wilkin, Rep. Bev Scalze, Rep. Lloyd Cybart, and facilitator Bret Busse at Eagan forum.



Superintendent Dr. Ric Dressen, Rep. Torrey Westrom, Sen. John Hottinger, Rep. Mary Ellen Otremba, and Sen. Dallas Sams at Alexandria forum.

Part I. Event Description

Background

The bipartisan Early Childhood Caucus was formed in 2003 by Representatives Nora Slawik (D, Maplewood), Jim Rhodes (R, St. Louis Park) and Senators Claire Robling (R, Jordan) and Becky Lourey (D, Kerrick). The purpose of the caucus is to influence and shape public policies that impact Minnesota's youngest children, their families and caregivers. The caucus seeks to educate legislators, create dialogue, build consensus, and provide direction for legislative action. The caucus is open to all members of the Minnesota legislature. Currently, the co-chairs are Senators John Hottinger (D, St. Peter), Claire Robling (R) and Representatives Doug Meslow (R) and Nora Slawik (D).

For the second year, a grant from The Sheltering Arms Foundation provided organizing funds for members of the Early Childhood Caucus to hold community forums across Minnesota. These events provided a place for sharing of ideas and dialogue between legislators and community members about local and statewide early childhood issues. Additional organizing and administrative support came from Ready 4K. This year, the forum communities were identified by the co-chairs of the Early Childhood Caucus.

Format

Events were held in schools, libraries, and community centers. Each event had a similar format, and the discussion was facilitated by a local community member (see Part II). In contrast to the 2004 forums, this year's format did not include a list of set questions for the legislators to answer. The primary focus was to hear questions and ideas from the community. The 90-minute forum format was as follows:

- I. Introduction - Lisa Cariveau (Forum Organizer) and/or local facilitator
- II. Community stories, ideas, and questions about early childhood - Facilitator
- III. Closing comments by legislators
- IV. Closing remarks - Local host or facilitator

Part II. Participants

Communities

Seven communities hosted forums. Originally, eight forums were scheduled; however, the Montevideo forum was cancelled due to dangerous winter weather conditions. In each community, local organizers helped with identifying a location and facilitator, community advertising, and other arrangements for setting up the events. In many instances, the local communities also provided child care services and refreshments. The help of these local organizers was essential and very much appreciated.

Participating communities and key community partners include:

Alexandria	Sarah Hicks, Child Care Resource and Referral, West Central Initiative
Eagan	Karen Keller, Early Childhood Family Services Advisory Council and Foundation of District 196
Faribault	Judy Covert, McKinley Early Childhood Center
Minneapolis	Ron Bell, Sabathani Community Center, Hennepin County Social Services
Princeton	Sue Hix, Community Education- Princeton Schools, Princeton Area Early Childhood Coalition
Shakopee	Marie Johnson, the CAP (Community Action Program) Agency
White Bear Lake	Carol McFarlane (White Bear Lake School Board) and White Bear Lake High School

A special thank you to the community members and legislators involved in organizing the Montevideo forum. Unfortunately, this forum was cancelled due to winter weather conditions. However, local organizing and advertising efforts were arranged by the Montevideo Early Childhood Coalition, Patrick Moore and Doug Spray, and The Southwest Minnesota Foundation and Sara Carlson. Thank you to Senator Gary Kubly and Representative Lyle Koenen who had planned to attend the forum.

Legislators

A total of 29 different legislators attended the forums, 14 Republicans and 15 Democrats. The bipartisan nature of the Early Childhood Caucus is essential, and this bipartisanship is reflected in the legislative attendance. Some legislators drove many miles to attend forums both inside and outside of their districts. There were at least three legislators present at each forum, and most community forums had five or six legislators in attendance.

The following legislators participated in ECC community forums from September–November 2005:

Senators

Linda Berglin- D, Minneapolis
 Dick Day- R, Owatonna
 John Hottinger- D, St. Peter
 Claire Robling- R, Jordan
 Dallas Sams- D, Staples
 Betsy Wergin- R, Princeton
 Charles Wiger- D, North St. Paul

Representatives

Michael Beard- R, Shakopee
 Laura Brod- R, New Prague
 Ray Cox- R, Northfield
 Lloyd Cybart- R, Apple Valley
 Sondra Erickson- R, Princeton
 Patti Fritz- D, Faribault
 Rick Hansen- D, South St. Paul
 Bill Hilty- D, Finlayson
 Frank Hornstein- D, Minneapolis
 Leon Lillie- D, North St. Paul
 Diane Loeffler- D, Minneapolis
 Doug Meslow- R, White Bear Lake
 Peter Nelson- R, Lindstrom
 Mary Ellen Otremba- D, Long Prairie
 Jeanne Poppe- D, Austin
 Connie Ruth- R, Owatonna
 Bev Scalze- D, Little Canada
 Nora Slawik- D, Maplewood
 Neva Walker- D, Minneapolis
 Lynn Wardlow- R, Eagan
 Torrey Westrom- R, Elbow Lake
 Tim Wilkin- R, Eagan

Facilitators

Facilitators of each forum were local advocates, educators, school board members, superintendents and program directors including:

- Faribault- Mike Thorsteinson, Executive Director: Three Rivers Community Action
- White Bear Lake- Dr. Rolf Parsons, Chair: White Bear Lake School Board
- Minneapolis - Ron Bell, Supervisor: Hennepin County Social Services & Carolyn Smallwood, Executive Director: Way to Grow
- Princeton - Mark Sleeper, Superintendent of Princeton Schools
- Eagan - Bret Busse, Director: Early Childhood Family Services ISD 196
- Shakopee- Kathy Busch, School Board: Shakopee Schools
- Alexandria – Dr. Ric Dressen, Superintendent of Alexandria Schools

Citizen Participants

Attendance and primary affiliation was taken from self reports on sign-in sheets at each forum. Approximately 400 people attended community forums this year, with an average of 36 people per event. The Minneapolis event was the largest, with roughly 200 people in attendance, and Shakopee was the smallest, with 23 reported attendees. According to the sign-in sheets, attendees came primarily from early childhood

education programs. At least 25% of attendees were affiliated with Head Start, ECFE or ECSE programs. Approximately 30 people identified themselves primarily as parents or citizens of the community. The next biggest group of participants was child care providers. A large number of attendees were associated with child advocacy and community organizations. Other groups regularly represented were: school boards, local foundations, local libraries, K-12 teachers, college students, law enforcement, and county commissioners. The primary early childhood affiliation of community members in 2005 was very similar to those represented at the 2004 forums

Part III. Discussion Content

The format for this year's forums was less structured than the previous year, and the community generally guided the discussion with varied questions and ideas. Feedback from surveys and community discussion did, however, reflect many common themes.

What is working well in Minnesota communities:

As shown by the forum communities, there are many positive things happening in early childhood. The varied groups of community members that attended the events indicate that interest in early childhood is widespread. At the forums, many parents shared positive stories of their involvement with organizations such as Head Start and ECFE. Community members who are a part of early childhood organizations pointed out that they very often collaborate and work together to provide the most supportive services possible for children and families in their communities.

Common themes from the community:

While the forum discussion was varied in each community, there were a number of common topics. These topics included:

- Concerns about child care reimbursement rates and how some providers are not able to provide services to many families due to these rates (topic most often mentioned at forums)
- Decreased funding for early childhood programs and the challenge of competing for financial resources
- Waiting lists for early care programs like Head Start and ECFE
- How to best increase parental involvement and collaboration with early childhood programs
- Increasing the professional status of early care and education providers through curriculum and training standards and salary increases
- How to most effectively advocate for more resources and funding for young children and early childhood programs

Ideas from citizens on how to address early childhood policy issues

Community members offered numerous ideas for how legislators can continue to support children and families. Many of these ideas were similar to the ones identified in the 2004 Forums. These ideas include:

- Promote early screening at 3 years of age
- Create an Early Childhood Committee in the MN House

- Provide parents with various options to choose for early care and education to best meet their family's needs*
- Create a more easily navigable system for families to utilize resources and services
- Propose a constitutional amendment to include access to early education*
- Restore cuts from the 2003 session*
- Increase the professional status of early childhood care providers through curriculum and training standards and salary increases
- Maintain the voluntary nature of early childhood programs
- Provide universal access and funding for preschool*
- Increase transportation funding for families to access services
- Increase support for children's mental health services
- Support additional services and resources for children and families learning English as a second language
- Encourage local school boards to increase allocation of funds to early childhood programs*

*signifies similar idea discussed at 2004 forums

What legislators said about the forums:

All of the legislators that attended the forums expressed gratitude for the opportunity to listen and learn from the communities. Legislators also offered suggestions about how to support children and families. Many legislators discussed the importance of continuing to support parent and families and increase their involvement in early childhood programs. Standards for curriculum and licensure were also common themes. Legislators encouraged community members to keep in contact with them, to "turn up the heat", and continue to offer them insights into and ideas about early childhood issues.

Part IV. Press Coverage

Press releases were sent out from the office of Senator John Hottinger, and communities sometimes followed up by making additional press contacts. The forums received newspaper advertising in many newspapers and additional coverage in Faribault, Minneapolis, Princeton, and Eagan. The appendix includes copies of several of these newspaper articles.

Part V. Next Steps

This year, with half of the number of forums as compared to 2004, there were nearly the same number of community attendees, and the number of legislators in attendance increased. This may signify an increase in interest level and awareness about early childhood issues. Because the community dialogue produced many common questions and ideas in 2004 and 2005, the Early Childhood Caucus may consider using these themes for future policy-related decisions.

The Early Childhood Caucus might consider seeking funds for a community forum organizer again in 2006. Numerous communities, including Edina, Northwest

Hennepin Suburbs, Fosston, and St Peter, have expressed an interest in organizing a forum in their communities.

In addition to the 2005 forums, The Sheltering Arms Foundation will contribute funding to organize a legislative training retreat.

Appendix of selected press coverage

Faribault Daily News– September 10, 2005
Faribault Daily News– September 14, 2005
Star Tribune (Minneapolis) – October 14, 2005
Princeton Union Eagle – November 3, 2005
Sun Newspapers (Eagan)- November 10, 2005

9/10/2005 5:00:00 AM

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Caucus for children

Legislators slated to discuss children's issues

By Pauline Schreiber
Daily News Staff Writer

FARIBAULT -- Faribault is the site for the first of several community forums being conducted statewide by the Bipartisan Early Childhood Caucus.

The event is 6:30 to 8 p.m. Tuesday in McKinley Early Childhood Center, 920 N.W. Fourth Ave.

Minnesota legislators hosting the forum include District 55B State Rep. Nora Slawik, DFL-St. Paul; District 26B State Rep. Patti Fritz, DFL-Faribault; District 26 State Sen. Dick Day, R-Owatonna; and District 26A State Rep. Connie Ruth, R-Owatonna.

"This forum is not coming from any one point of view, but for the purpose of anyone interested in early childhood issues in the community to come and talk with legislators," said Judy Covert, director of Faribault's McKinley Early Childhood Center.

Mike Thorsteinson, director of Three Rivers Community Action Center, the sponsor of the local Head Start program, will be the moderator for the forum.

State funding for early childhood-family education programs was cut by 20 percent in the last biennial state budget, Covert said. While the current biennial budget restores 7 percent of the lost funds, "we still have less to work with. However, this forum is not just about state funding for our programs. It's about daycare subsidies to working families and other issues of concern to parents of young children."

Fritz said she encourages grandparents as well as parents, "and anyone else concerned about the needs of infants and preschoolers to attend the forum. The Bipartisan Early Childhood Caucus was one of the first things I joined as a freshman legislator. The subject touches all of us because it is so very important that children get off to a good start in life."

The community forums being held around the state are being funded with a grant from The Sheltering Arms Foundation, Covert said.

"It's a great opportunity to talk with legislators about the importance of early childhood family education as well as other issues affecting infants and preschoolers," Covert added.

-- Pauline Schreiber can be reached at 333-3127 or pschreiber@faribault.com.

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Faribault forum focuses on children

By Pauline Schreiber
Daily News Staff Writer

FARIBAULT -- No one in the gym of Faribault's McKinley Early Childhood Center Tuesday night disputed the value of investing in early childhood education.

However, due to limited state funding, early childhood family education programs dollars were cut three years ago. This past session some funding was restored, but members of the Bipartisan Early Childhood Legislative Caucus is holding eight community forums around the state to help with guidance on spending priorities. Faribault's forum Tuesday was one of the first and attracted more than 70 people.

"We've been listening for years on how important the early childhood years are, so we are here tonight to listen to what you have to say should be the state's priority in early childhood education funding so we use state dollars in the best possible way," said District 26A State Rep. Connie Ruth, R-Owatonna.

Besides Ruth, Minnesota legislators hosting the forum were: District 55B State Rep. Nora Slawik, DFL-St. Paul; District 26B State Rep. Patti Fritz, DFL-Faribault; District 26 State Sen. Dick Day, R-Owatonna; District 24 State Sen. John Hottinger, DFL-Mankato; and District 25B State Rep. Ray Cox, R-Northfield. Mike Thorsteinson, director of Three Rivers Community Action Center, the sponsor of the local Head Start program, was the moderator for the forum.

Jodi Wenner, a Faribault Jefferson Elementary School kindergarten teacher, said many children who could benefit from early childhood programs are not being identified early enough.

"Some kids start kindergarten not even knowing how to hold a crayon. Many parents only bring their kids for screening before they are to start kindergarten. If all kids were screened at 3 years old, then, if they had a (developmental) problems, they could be in preschool programs that would help them be ready for kindergarten when they start," Wenner said. "As it is, we are playing catch-up with many kids."

Hottinger said the Legislature provides dollars to encourage school districts to screen children as early as 3 years old, but that money comes from funds for screening 5 year olds.

"I think early childhood education is the most important issue this state has for its future," Hottinger said. "Studies show it is smart to invest in early childhood programs. It's great public policy."

Slawik agreed, mentioning studies that show early intervention and programs for preschoolers with special needs pay off economically for society. She herself has a special needs child.

But most all children can benefit from preschool programs, said Wendy Susan, an early childhood and special education teacher at McKinley Center. She asked legislators if they support mandated preschool programs for 4-year-olds, like several states are funding.

"I think we should have that as our future goal," Hottinger said, but he wasn't sure where state dollars to fund such a state mandate would come from.

And, Cox said, the state isn't currently funding all-day kindergarten. Those districts that have it pay for a large share locally.

Fritz pointed out the state does help fund many early childhood programs, many of which are offered at McKinley Early Childhood Center.

"McKinley Center is an example of an excellent early childhood and family education center," Fritz said. "I think we're going in the right direction when it comes to early childhood programs, it's just that we're going at a snail's pace. You (in the audience) need to help educate legislators on the benefit of spending on early childhood programs."

Day said, "Legislators as a group are pro-education and pro-children. We'd rather talk about funding programs to help children than funding a stadium."

-- Pauline Schreiber can be reached at 333-3127 or pschreiber@faribault.com.

Early childhood, alas, is a battleground here

Lori Sturdevant

Last update: October 14, 2005 at 4:51 PM



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Lori Sturdevant

[Wondering if tax ride goes too easy on rich](#)

When the governor of Iowa, Tom Vilsack, paid a visit a few days ago, I asked how he and his Legislature get anything done. The partisan split one state south is even meaner than Minnesota's: 25-25 in the Senate; 51 R's, 49 D's in the House.

Next thing I knew, the two-term Democrat was talking up early childhood education.

"The goal of governing is to figure out where the common ground is," Vilsack said. He found a fertile patch around efforts to improve the affordability and quality of child care. In the past three years, Iowa pumped \$50 million more in state funds toward those goals -- \$22 million this year -- without raising taxes to do it. He'll push for more next year.

Vilsack's Strong Start initiative was a natural for the state with the third-highest percentage of women in the workforce, he said. It includes higher child care subsidies for low-income parents, quality ratings for child care providers, training for child care workers (with the carrot of higher reimbursement for a trained staff), tax credits for preschool tuition, and grants for local efforts at parent education.

So what's going on in the state with the highest percentage of women in the workforce?

Let's see: Minnesota cut \$150 million from child care support for low-income families in the past three years. Legislators cut, then partially restored, funds for Head Start and the state's much-admired Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) program.

Maddeningly, the 2005 session also killed funding for a survey of kindergartners' school readiness. Three years of that effort produced the alarming finding that only about half of Minnesota kindergartners arrive at school fully prepared for its lessons. Apparently, that's news legislators would rather not hear.

Those changes were pushed by Republicans and opposed by DFLers. Early childhood doesn't sit on common ground in Minnesota. It's on a battleground.

Why? I puzzled over that question Tuesday night at Sabathani Center in south Minneapolis, at a public forum convened by the Legislature's Early Childhood Caucus.

Two things were striking about that event. One was that people who care about child care just kept coming. A dimly lit room prepared for about 100 people overflowed with more than 200 grown-ups and kids.

The room buzzed with resentment over the escalating cost low-income parents must pay for licensed child care, and the stress the state's retreat has put not only on household budgets but also on child care providers. Several inner-city providers said they aren't sure they'll be in business in six months, because so many of the parents they serve can no longer afford their services.

The other conspicuous fact was this: There wasn't a Republican elected official in the room.

Five legislators represented the Early Childhood Caucus. All were DFLers. Members of and/or candidates for the city's school board, City Council and Park Board were there in force -- all DFLers.

Despite the strength in numbers the forum produced, the absence of Republicans made the big showing seem futile, and the cause marginal.

State Rep. Nora Slawik, DFL-Maplewood, was obliged to explain that the Early Childhood Caucus she helped organize includes Republicans, too -- dozens of them. Further, the Minneapolis event was one of a series of forums, and at those in the suburbs, Republican legislators were in attendance.

But last session, some of those same Republicans were willing to cut child care help for poor families, even as they boasted about increases in ECFE and Head Start. They should have heard what the parents said at Sabathani: Licensed child care is the only shot many low-income kids get at preschool, and that shot is being taken away from them.

Lori Sturdevant is a Star Tribune editorial writer and columnist. She is at lsturdevant@startribune.com.

Princeton Union Eagle – Nov 3rd, 2005

BIPARTISAN EARLY CHILDHOOD CAUCUS

By Elly Rittenour

Two primary goals of early childhood education are how to get parents involved and get funding.

That's what the audience of 25 heard from five Minnesota legislators, some being members of the Bipartisan Early Childhood Caucus, last Thursday evening at a community forum at the Princeton Middle School media room.

Members of the caucus who were on the panel were Sen. Betsy Wergin (R) and Rep. Sondra Erickson (R), both Princeton, and Sen. John Hottinger (D), chairperson of the caucus. Non-members of the caucus on the panel were Rep. Pete Nelson (R), serving Dist. 17B and Rep. Bill Hilty (D) from Dist 8A serving Pine, Carlton and St. Louis counties.

Princeton Superintendent Mark Sleeper moderated.

Erickson opened the discussion by explaining her role in making Minnesota a better place for young children. Erickson serves on the Education Committee in the House of Representatives.

She said testimony says we should have parents involved, but "how we get parents more involved is the challenge". The primary education of children through the Early Childhood Education program in Princeton is designed to invite parents to be involved, she said.

Wergin added that special emphasis should be given to parents "who really need help", particularly parents and families that are relocating often during a school year and parents that have immigrated to Minnesota and speak another language.

Hilty, who said he had a great interest and supports early childhood education said, "It's important to have parental involvement and involvement of the entire community. It's a good investment for the community and the state."

"What's really important, is funding - it's always a major issue."

In describing what the caucus does, Wergin explained it is bi-partisan and prioritizes the primary needs for early childhood education to produce bi-partisan support for what comes out of the caucus. By having support in the legislature of all political parties, legislation has a better chance of success, she said.

Erickson noted that both the house and senate last year submitted good bi-partisan bills, but with the need to cut state spending those requests failed.

School boards, Wergin said, can re-allocate monies they receive per student to achieve their goals, too. For example the usual allocation for high school students is one-and-a-half times more than early childhood students. School boards can change that formula, she said.

Wergin went on to say that she believed schools need to work for smaller class sizes for elementary education. Reading is so key that if a student gets into fourth grade without knowing how to read, generally, that student will have to work harder and will have trouble the rest of his/her school career, Wergin said.

Sleeper interjected that the Princeton Schools allocate monies on a basis of where the dollars can best be used.

One thing to depend on is there will be no more money, added Hilty, and to just shift money is just "paying Peter to pay Paul."

One solution could be if a school district rejects unfunded mandates from the state, there could be other choices or options the school could consider, Erickson said. Every district is different, and "we (the state) have to encourage school boards to look at their budgets and the state provide more flexibility," she added.

The audience dialogue continued with another question regarding the state's childcare (day care) system, noting funding cuts have been negatively affected. Assistance from the state has been reduced, thus affecting the cost of day care, resulting in families bearing a greater burden.

Wergin said one thing about Mille Lacs County that has happened is the way the state computes the assistance each county gets, it is causing an unfair reduction of assistance. She said this is because of casino monies coming into the Mille Lacs County tribal day care system, making it very inexpensive. This, in turn, skews the formula, causing the whole county's need for assistance to be reduced and unfair to non-tribal parents.

However, Wergin reminded the audience, while Minnesota was in the past at the top for good day care services, the state is still "in the middle of the pack".

A member of the audience said Minnesota in the year 2003 was fifth from the top in childcare, but now is 40th in 2005, according to the Child Defense Fund organization.

Erickson responded that from 1994 to 2004, the childcare subsidy has increased 300 per cent. The state has other studies that says it is at the top in the nine-state region, Erickson said.

Hottinger said the reimbursement system is now causing the loss of childcare providers and he is concerned about the 18,000 children now missing from the system. "Where did they go?" he asked. Are they now staying with their grandparents or other relatives?" He felt the state needs to know this and re-instate the subsidy.

Sen. Wergin is a leader in catching abuses in the systems and says the state needs to have standards and make measurements, Hottinger said, so children coming out of childcare will be well-qualified for entering the school system.

A representative of the Princeton Library explained how librarians are being trained now to learn about reading skills for pre-schoolers. Then, acting as trainers, they will visit day care providers to offer their training to them.

District 477 School Board member Lisa Fobbe, the only board member to attend, asked for Wergin's and Erickson's support for the operating levy that will be voted on Nov. 8 by citizens in the school district. Fobbe asked that they write a letter to the editor in the Princeton Union-Eagle newspaper next week in support of the levy.

Fobbe said the Princeton school district needs support from Princeton legislators because "we're at the whim of what the legislature decides."

Erickson replied that "as a legislator I don't write letters in support of things that raise people's taxes - that's their decision." She added that she thought Princeton was actually doing quite well. Wergin stated she hoped the levy question is supported by the voters. Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty has been talking about special funding for kindergarten, Erickson said. There has been discussion, too, of funding all-day kindergarten, she said.

One thing about all-day kindergarten, Wergin said, is there must be space available for it and Princeton doesn't have any space now. She said the state does allow school districts to have limited levies that don't require a vote, for special funding.

The meeting finished with a discussion on the last three years of tax cuts and how it hurt some programs like Head Start and early childhood education versus forcing a tax increase on state residents. The caucus will be traveling to about four more areas throughout the state to present its forum.

Lisa Cariveau, organizer of the forums, said the forums are presented through a grant from Sheltering Arms foundation that supports social, child, and community issues.

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Dialogue addresses early childhood in District 196

By Erica Christoffer\Sun Newspapers

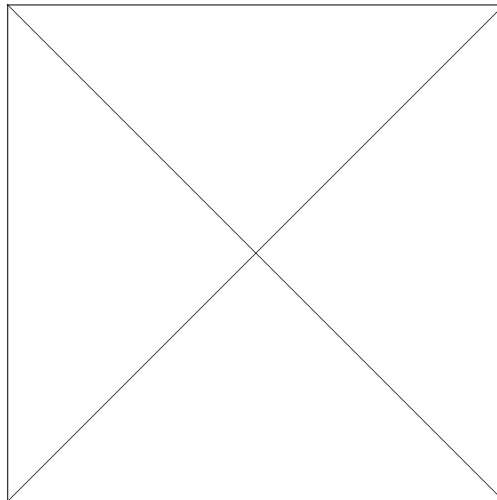
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When Apple Valley resident Lisa Kula's daughter, Ashley, was having speech problems at the age of 2, teachers from District 196 Early Childhood Family Services (ECFS) were there.

They recommended Kula try using flashcards to teach words, and in no time Ashley was talking like a social butterfly.

On Nov. 1 Kula attended the Early Childhood Caucus public forum at Black Hawk Middle School in Eagan to share her story with local legislators.

"It does help," Kula said about early childhood education.

About 50 parents, teachers and community members gathered in the middle school lecture hall to talk about issues facing early childhood education. The forum was one of eight public events being conducted throughout the Twin Cities.

Members of the Early Childhood Caucus, Rep. Lynn Wardlow, R-38B, Rep. Nora Slawik, D-55B, Rep. Rick Hansen, D-39A, Rep. Tim Wilkin, R-38A, Rep. Lloyd Cvhart, R-37A, and Rep. Bev Scalze, D-54B, listened as the audience told

stories and asked questions about the future of early childhood education in the state and in District 196.

ECFS encompasses Early Childhood Family Education, early childhood screening, School Readiness, Head Start, Family School and Early Childhood Special Education.

"We need to actually prioritize these programs," said Kelly Johns with the ECFS advisory council. "It's not just an emphasis on ECFE, it's also an emphasis on people who cannot afford to take their kids to the school readiness programs and allow them transportation so they have some experience before entering our K-12 system."

Budget issues were a continuing theme throughout the evening as the emotions of many parents ran high. In District 196, funding was cut by the state Legislature from \$120 per child to \$96 per child in 2004. A staff of 72 teachers and assistants were reduced to 40, drastically reducing class offerings.

Johns said that more state funds need to be invested into early childhood education with a greater emphasis on E-12 education rather than simply K-12 education.

"I would argue that ECFE is for everybody," District 196 parent Mary Voight said. "This is the family value that we all talk about."

Voight put legislators on the spot, asking them about their voting record and inquiring about how to get early childhood on top of the budgetary priority list.

"Telling your story is what makes an impact to legislators," Hansen said.

Hansen, from South St. Paul, has participated in ECFE classes with his family.

"ECFE has really helped us in managing family and work," Hansen said. "I'm a believer."

Debbie Johnson, Country Garden Preschool director and ECFS committee member, said funding transportation for early childhood services is one way to involve needy families.

"Many of them don't have transportation, so if funding were available for more transportation services I think it would be helpful," Johnson said.

Wilkin defended cuts to ECFS.

"We have to find a balance and it's a very difficult job to fund a balance that pleases everyone," Wilkin said.

This year early childhood funding was increased from \$96 per child to \$104 per child, allowing District 196 to regain three staff.

However, the district still cannot serve all the families in ECFS with funding still significantly below its previous amount, Johns said. There are waiting lists for all District 196 ECFS programs, including 45 emigrant families for Family School.

"It's an ugly process," Scalze said. "It's tough because there's not enough money."

Cybart of Apple Valley said, "All of us are here because we care about this."

Prior to being elected, Cybart said he didn't know anything about early childhood education. "I thought it was just glorified daycare," Cybart said. However, after getting involved with the Early Childhood Caucus and touring local facilities, Cybart said, "I was pleasantly surprised."

Bret Busse, ECFE Foundation director and moderator of the public forum, cited a study by Rob Grunewald and Arthur Rolnick entitled "Early Childhood Development: Economic Development with a High Public Return," which states that investment into early childhood programs yields a 12 percent economic return.

"Those kids stay out of jail, they do better in school," Busse said. "There are a number of ways those dollars come back."

In regard to ECFS, Wardlow said, "They're actually talking about how to raise kids."

Slawik encouraged audience members to continue questioning their legislators on early childhood funding, which will eventually evoke change.

"The work that you guys do has resulted in the Early Childhood Caucus existing," said Hansen.