

Young families engaged in solving early child care issues

Greenfield families with preschool age children have more child care options today than they did a year ago, and they will have even more come fall when the Nodaway Valley School District opens a voluntary preschool program for four-year old children. The availability of quality child care options was a need discussed, researched, and campaigned for during Greenfield's Horizons program.

Horizons is a program directed by Iowa State University Extension with funding from the Northwest Area Foundation for communities of less than 5,000 with a poverty level of at least 10 percent. The program guides communities in the exploration and understanding of local poverty issues and establishment of goals that move the community towards prosperity for all.

A letter of invitation was all it took for Joan Finck to join Horizons. She saw it as a way to learn more about the circle of poverty, a way to get more involved and a chance to do something that would really make a difference for her community.

"In study circles, we looked at the data, had great group discussions, then considered what actions would make things better in Greenfield and surrounding communities," she said. "We took those ideas to the visioning sessions and identified families with young children as one group whose needs we should address. This is an interest of mine, so I've been involved with the work group since the get-go."

Finck's work group shared findings made available by the Iowa School Board Foundation saying that significant evidence from research reveals a strong link between preschool attendance and children's success and progress in school, particularly for children with high-risk factors related to poverty. Children who attend preschool typically enter kindergarten with increased cognitive abilities, increased literacy and mathematics skills, and tend to get along better with others than children who do not attend preschool. Preschool attendance has also been associated with positive benefits lasting into adulthood that include higher-skilled jobs, increased earnings and reduced crime rates

Young parents of all income levels were well represented on the work group and were passionate about sharing data at community informational meetings and to the school board in a request that the Board apply for the statewide voluntary preschool program grant.

"When I learned about the change in communities that had received the preschool grants, I knew the school board needed to hear the message and be encouraged to make the grant application," said Finck.

She had never addressed a body of elected officials before, but her points were clear and convincing as she spoke about the need for high quality early childhood education – the board voted to apply and they were one of 48 Iowa districts approved for funding. The planning done as part of the Horizons project was instrumental in preparing the grant. The grant readers noted the high level of planning by the community, planning to serve low-income children, and commitment to quality early childhood education.

Maureen Lonsdale, Green Valley AEA early childhood consultant, credits Horizons for creating community involvement. "The work of this group has created community awareness and change," Lonsdale said. "Not only will we have a comprehensive preschool at Nodaway Valley School, but we have three new child care providers - two of them registered and one is in the process of being licensed, and a provider now offers 24-hour child care. Parents have stepped up and provided insight into their needs. The community is responding and parents continue to have ownership in making quality child care and preschool a priority here."

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