



Danbury early childhood educators inspire Congressman Chris Murphy

Danbury early childhood educators an inspiration to congressman

By Eileen FitzGerald
Staff writer

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DANBURY -- It was about money in the end.

Providing help to educate parents.

Financial aid to better train preschool teachers.

Grants to increase space for children in early childhood programs.

Children in the region might have gotten a much needed boost as U.S. Rep. Chris Murphy, D-5th Dist., listened Friday as nearly two dozen early childhood educators talked about the challenges of providing quality education and support to young children and their families.

Murphy emphasized President Barack Obama's commitment to serving young children, and the group provided him with recommendations as the federal government works out a new early childhood grant program.

"President Obama, in conjunction with Congress, is focused on early childhood education" called the 0 to 5 agenda, Murphy said. "I came from a family of educators. I have an 11-month-old son at home, and I'm glad to become an expert on this issue from a personal and professional level."

Murphy said the federal stimulus funding targeted for preschools should be considered the sign of an upward trend of funding for early childhood education, rather than a one-time offering. In Connecticut, \$24 million in stimulus funds is earmarked to create 3,000 more seats in early childhood programs.

In addition, a proposed early childhood challenge grant will provide competitive grants for plans and implementation of preschool programing.

Murphy expects Congress to reauthorize the federal No Child Left Behind legislation next year, which sets out the education policy and standards for public schools, but he hopes needed reform of the bill would take into account younger children.

The meeting, organized by Education Connection and held at its Main Street office Friday morning, came on the heels of the recent release of an early childhood strategic plan for Danbury.

The plan was developed over the past 18 months to define strategies and action needed to ensure Danbury children from birth to age 8 are healthy and ready for school. That dovetails with Gov. M. Jodi Rell's initiative "Ready by five (for kindergarten), fine by nine."

The plan has four main areas of focus, starting with health awareness, which covers topics like ensuring the behavioral health needs of children and their families are met and increasing local access to affordable medical, oral and mental health services.

The second focus of the plan is to improve the community's support and education of parents so they can provide a safe, nurturing environment that promotes learning.

The third aspect of the plan is to address the

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concern for funding so all child-care providers are well trained and that there enough affordable places for child care and preschool.

The final area of focus is to ensure continuity of curriculum between prekindergarten and kindergarten and the need to foster parent-friendly schools.

"From the start, the goal of the plan was to ensure that Danbury's birth to 8-year-olds are healthy and ready for school." Education Connection's Kristen Kennen said. "Many families in our community need more intense support but all families need some information."

Among recommendations the educators gave Murphy was a request for more funding to support quality teaching in the early childhood programs and to require school districts to spend 10 percent of their federal Title 1 grants on early childhood education.

Other requests they made included having current programs funded before new initiatives and federal government support for the existing NAEYC accreditation system for rating early childhood programs, rather than starting a new system.

Contact Eileen FitzGerald at eileenf@newstimes.com or at (203) 731-3333.

Murphy's goals n Provide more funding to support quality teaching in early childhood programs. n Require school districts to spend 10 percent of federal Title 1 grants on early childhood education. n Request current programs be funded before new initiatives. n Request the federal government support the existing NAEYC accreditation system for rating early childhood programs.

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