

Military tactic proves itself in progression of teachers, children in day care

John Burbank; News Tribune columnist

A funny thing happened to liberals last year. They took a page out of the military's playbook and scored a touchdown.

For years child advocates and early childhood education specialists have witnessed the success of the military's child-care program and bemoaned the lack of comparable programs in the civilian sector. And then someone had an idea: If it is good for the military, it may be good for the rest of us.

Armed with this insight, child-care workers, teachers and parents created a career ladder for child-care workers much like the one the military has. Then Gov. Gary Locke took the lead in funding a \$4 million pilot program for what has become known as the Early Childhood Education Career Development Ladder.

Now 1,250 teachers in 124 centers around the state are participating in the career ladder, including teachers in 12 Tacoma and Pierce County child-care centers. It all makes sense, especially with Fort Lewis setting the example right next door.

Here is what we know about the military child-care experience. In the early 1990s, military child-care centers were experiencing a 300 percent turnover rate of teachers each year. The quality of this child care was minimal and, in fact, downright unhealthy for the children in care. So the military, with the backing and authority of Congress, totally revamped child care at its facilities, starting with the teachers.

Now child-care teachers progress along a pay scale with wage increments determined by completing relevant education and training modules. If they don't complete this training, they are out. As a result, child-care workers now invest themselves in their work and their education for this work. In doing so, they progress along a wage scale from \$8.48 an hour to more than \$20 an hour for center directors and program directors. And, no surprise, turnover has dropped to between 20 and 25 percent. The turnover that does exist is mostly due to the usual movement of military personnel.

At Fort Lewis, this new child-care system has resulted in all three of the child-care centers on post receiving national quality accreditation. This new system was good for the child-care teachers and for the children in their care. And that is no surprise; the most important "ingredients" for quality early childhood education are the quality and consistency of the child-care teacher.

That means the children benefit immensely from reduced teacher turnover and teachers who are going back to school to increase their expertise and knowledge as early childhood education providers.

At Happy Days Daycare and Preschool in University Place, you will find the same transformation of the early childhood education career, thanks to the Washington State Early Childhood Education Career Development Ladder. This career ladder puts into place a wage scale with built-in wage increments for relevant education, job responsibility and experience.

As teachers gain credentials in early childhood education at community colleges, their wages go up. And as

they invest themselves in this career and gain more job responsibilities, their wages go up.

This career ladder isn't rocket science. It is based on the common-sense notion that when the value of people's work is recognized and encouraged, their own self-esteem and commitment to their work go up.

"The money sure helps," says Marla Bills, a lead teacher at Happy Days Daycare, "but more importantly, the staff sees a future in early childhood education. More child-care workers are going back to school than ever before."

This perspective is echoed by parents of the children in career ladder centers. Thirty parents from around the state got together recently with the governor's child-care expert. They wanted to thank her for the career ladder and request that the funding for it be increased so that more children could receive the quality of care and education their children were now getting in the career ladder centers.

One parent said, "Morale is definitely up, and the teachers are bringing what they're learning in the classroom into the center. I'm seeing new enthusiasm, new energy and new creativity." I have always thought that civilians should be learning things from the military. Here is one lesson that benefits all families, no matter whether they are working at Fort Lewis or at the Poodle Dog. - - -

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