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Career Ladder Keeps Child-Care Staff on Job

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It's a given that as the dynamics of the work force continue to change with the growing number of single parent and dual-income households, so must the emphasis be increased to provide adequate child care.

That's why Yakima is fortunate to be in on the ground floor of a state-sponsored pilot program that gives money to child-care centers for pay raises and training.

Gov. Gary Locke was in Yakima recently to laud Carroll's Children's Center in Yakima as an example of what the \$4 million program can accomplish in local day-care centers. The Career Ladder program gave money to 124 child-care centers across the state.

Centers such as Carroll's use the cash to pay for training and to give raises to employees who stay on the job. Each year nets an employee another 25 cents an hour, said Carroll's director, Maureen Mould, a longtime advocate of more training and higher wages for child-care workers.

Carroll's, which cares for 115 children, received \$80,000. Experienced workers there got raises of as much as \$1.25 per hour.

The program is paid for with unused welfare money, which is a natural fit. As more people come off welfare rolls into the work force, it stands to reason there will be more demands on child-care facilities. That's particularly true of single mothers. In no way should a person's exit from welfare sentence a child to less than high quality care because of economic factors.

But this is not a welfare program. It's just a productive use of money that once went for public assistance.

One of the things to like about it is that it has upgraded child care itself as an occupation, focusing on added training and



income for those who care for the children.

The program was established to battle high turnover rates among child-care workers.

Up to 43 percent of employees in the child-care field leave their jobs every six months. That kind of turnover is disruptive to kids and damaging to staff members who constantly must deal with inexperienced workers.

Locke and local officials both report that during the 11 months this pilot project has been on line, it has already started chipping away at that dismal turnover rate.

"I have received hundreds of letters from parents, teachers and center directors from around the state about the positive effects of Career Ladder," Locke said at an Olympia news conference last week. "It is doing exactly what it was intended to do. It has improved quality of child care by reducing turnover and motivating teachers to get more training in early childhood education."

The experiment is set to run for another six months, and then Locke will decide whether to continue it.

Judging from early returns, the case for not only continuing the program, but expanding it, seems solid.



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