

EDUCATION

LOCAL COLLEGES IN THE NEWS

Holyoke Community College receives \$600k grant to expand free child watch program

HOLYOKE – Holyoke Community College has been awarded a \$600,000 grant from the Irene E. and George A. Davis Foundation to expand its Itsy Bitsy Child Watch program to serve more student-parents.

Itsy Bitsy Child Watch is a free center on HCC's main campus for parents in need of short-term child care while they attend class, study, or meet with tutors and advisers. It opened as a pilot program for the fall 2022 semester with a \$100,000 state allocation. At the time, HCC was only the second community college in Massachusetts, and the only one in western Massachusetts, to offer a free campus child watch service.

The center is open to HCC student-parents with children three months to 12 years old.

Since its launch, the program has proven to be widely popular and transformational for many HCC students.

Without it, "I could not come to school," said biology major Alondra Serrano, of Holyoke, one of the first HCC student-parents to sign up for the Itsy Bitsy Child Watch program last year for her daughter, Anna, now 3.

"Our first semester, we had 19 students enrolled," said Kimm Quinlan, director of HCC's Early Childhood Initiatives, which includes the Itsy Bitsy Child Watch. "Now we have more than 40. After just one year, it has become clear that there is a demonstrable need



Ciaran Murphy, assistant director of HCC's Itsy Bitsy Child Watch program, blows a bubble for 2-year-old Renwick, the son of HCC liberal arts major Kya Ransom of Greenfield.

and demand for expansion."

The \$600,000 grant will enable HCC to relocate the center to a larger, fully renovated new space, hire additional staff, and extend its hours of operation to accommodate more children, especially during public school vacations, which do not always align with the college calendar.

"HCC remains at the forefront of pioneering innovative pathways to enhance educational accessibility for every student," said Paul Belsito, executive director of the Davis Foundation. "At HCC, the concept of community is a verb in action, and the success of The Itsy Bitsy Child Watch is a testament to

this commitment. Here at the Irene E. and George A. Davis Foundation, we are honored to be able to contribute to the growth of this vibrant and impactful program, which not only offers the highest quality child care support to student-parents but also positions HCC as a proactive leader in early education and care as well as higher education."

Sometime in 2024, the Itsy Bitsy Child Watch center, now located on the first floor of the Marieb Science building, will move to a renovated space on the second floor of the Frost Building, closer to other student service and support programs, such as the Thrive Student Resource Center and Food Pantry;

Homestead Market, which accepts SNAP benefits; CHD Mental Health Services; Financial Aid; and the new Elaine Marieb Adult Learner Success Center (also scheduled to open in 2024).

"This investment will enable our early childhood team to provide high-quality early learning experiences for more children," said President George Timmons. "The remodeled space will provide the youngest members of our campus community with ample opportunities to explore, play, and learn. Dozens more HCC student-parents will be able to attend classes and access campus-based student resources without having to worry about child care."

Based on one year of data, the Itsy Bitsy Child Watch has already proven to be having a positive impact on student retention, course completion, and success, said Quinlan. Fall 2022 to spring 2023 retention rates for students who used the child watch center were 86 percent, "which is a really great number," while 82 percent completed all their courses, and on average saw their grade point averages increase by more than 1 point.

"So, we do think that reducing the barrier of child care and allowing students to attend class, meet with their advisers, and meet with tutors has absolutely helped this small group of people, and we hope that continues," Quinlan said. ■