

EDITORIAL

Free child care at HCC well worth emulating

A NEW CHILD CARE PROGRAM AT HOLYOKE Community College has doubled the number of students it serves in little over a year. Such explosive growth demonstrates the unmet need young families have for child care.

And it signals an opportunity for other community colleges.

Besides the rapid expansion, the Itsy Bitsy Child Watch Program at HCC is remarkable for being the only free daycare program at any of the four community colleges in western Massachusetts, and only the second in the state.

Back in the fall of 2022, the free center started providing short-term care for children aged 3 months to 12 years old, while their parents attended class or handled other college business. That first semester, 19 students used the services. This past semester, the number jumped to 40.

Now, with the help of a \$600,000 grant, the center will relocate to larger quarters on campus, plus hire at least three additional child care providers. HCC officials say free child care dismantles one of the barriers that families must overcome as parents return to college.

What college officials have yet to determine is whether the increased free child care need is directly related to Gov. Maura Healey's MassReconnect Plan, which offers Massachusetts residents over 25 years old free tuition to the state's community colleges.

What's certain is that young families need more low-cost child care options, especially parents with young children looking to return to college.

Community colleges are not the only places young parents go to school. Young parents seeking their high school equivalency degrees struggle to attend adult basic education classes because paying for child care is so expensive. The same problem presents itself for immigrant parents looking to improve their English in daytime classes.

Providing free child care for all parents may not be feasible, but building on HCC's success by extending free child care to other western Massachusetts community colleges would show a deep commitment to young families.

The Itsy Bitsy Child Watch program has already demonstrated its worth on the HCC campus, allowing young parents the opportunity to return to school, and then to the labor force, as better educated workers.

The question is whether lawmakers and the other community college leaders are paying attention to the solution sitting in plain sight on the Holyoke campus.
