



Ciaran Murphy, assistant director of Holyoke Community College'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. (COURTESY OF HOLYOKE COMMUNITY COLLEGE)

HOLYOKE

HCC child care program to expand

Center receives \$600K grant

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The Itsy Bitsy Child Watch program at Holyoke Community College will expand to serve more student-parents.

Thanks to a \$600,000 grant from The Irene E. and George A. Davis Foundation, the Itsy Bitsy Child Watch center will relocate to a renovated space on the second floor of the Frost Building on HCC's main campus next year. The program also will hire additional staff and extend its hours of operation.

A ribbon-cutting will be scheduled for the fall, Kimm Quinlan, the director of HCC's Early Childhood Initiatives, which includes the Itsy Bitsy Child Watch program, said in an email Wednesday.

The free center provides short-term child care for children age 3 months to 12 years old, while their parents attend class, study, or meet with tutors and advisers.

The program operates with three staff members, plus

students from various campus programs who help out.

The Itsy Bitsy program schedule is built around parents, and the center is usually open from 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. and when necessary, until 9 p.m., Quinlan wrote.

Educators at the program use developmentally appropriate curriculum to meet the children's needs, she wrote.

"All materials, toys and learning activities are designed to provide opportunities to develop the foundational skills necessary to build for future literacy, physical and academic success," Quinlan wrote.

According to Quinlan, the number of Itsy Bitsy Child Watch enrollees has doubled since its inception.

"Our first semester, we had 19 students enrolled," Quinlan wrote. "Now, we have more than 40. After just one year, it has become clear that there is a demonstrable need and demand for expansion."

Additionally, in a year, the program has proven to have a positive impact on student retention, course completion

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and success, Quinlan wrote.

For students who used the program during the fall 2022 to spring 2023 semesters, the retention rate was 86%, with 82% of participants completing all courses, and grade-point averages increasing by more than a point.

Quinlan said reducing the child care barrier has positively affected this small group of students by allowing them to attend class and use student resources.

"We hope that continues," Quinlan wrote.

College President George Timmons said the remodeled space will provide the youngest members of the 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," he said.

Itsy Bitsy Child Watch opened as a pilot program in the fall 2022 semester with a \$100,000 state allocation.

At the time, HCC was the second community college in the state and the only one in Western Massachusetts to offer free campus-based child care services, officials wrote.

Since its launch, the program has become transformational for many HCC students, officials said.

"In the new larger space, we hope to have more opportunity to provide care to school-age children during school vacations, snow days and summer," Quinlan wrote.

Paul Belsito, executive director of the Davis Foundation, said "community is a verb in action," and the success of the Itsy Bitsy Child Watch is a testament.

"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," Belsito said.

The Itsy Bitsy program expansion comes four months after Gov. Maura T. Healey launched the Mass-Reconnect program, which established free community college for Massachusetts residents aged 25 and older and tuition to about 3,000 nursing students.

Since the Itsy Bitsy program is only in its second year of operation, it is unclear if the increase in use is related to Mass Reconnect or if the program is becoming more integrated into the college community, Quinlan wrote.

Since 89% of the students using the program are over 25, which is one of the eligibility requirements for Mass Reconnect, the college is projecting that more and more student-parents will need this program to support their academics, Quinlan wrote.