

HOLYOKE

# HCC to offer free child care for students

Itsy Bitsy Child Watch to open in March; first of its kind in western Mass.

By **DUSTY CHRISTENSEN**  
Staff Writer

HOLYOKE — Beginning in March, Holyoke Community College will become the first community college in western Massachusetts to offer a drop-in child care program for

student parents.

In an announcement Monday, HCC said that it would soon introduce “Itsy Bitsy Child Watch” — a free, short-term “child-watch” program for children between the ages of six weeks to 12. Parents will be able to sign up in advance for child care while they remain inside on campus for classes, tutoring or other support services. They will be given a restaurant pager to alert them if they need to return to the child care center on the first floor of the Marieb Building.

“It’s not our goal to be in the day-care business,” college President Christina Royal said in a statement. “Our goal is to be able to serve our students by providing short-term child watch they can access while they attend class or a tutoring session or other educational supports. That is our focus, and it’s been a long road to get here.”

Sheila Gould, the director of the college’s early childhood education program, said in a phone interview Monday that the program will be “a

huge game changer” for students, some of whom have had to drop classes or change majors in the past because of a lack of child care.

“Child care can be a barrier and sometimes people don’t need the traditional full-time child care,” Gould said. “We want to provide an opportunity where it’s more of a drop off — as-needed, short-term care. But your child is in the same building ... It’s just a nice feeling, your child is steps away but you can focus.”

The Itsy Bitsy Child Watch will be

the first program of its kind at any of the community colleges in western Massachusetts, Gould said. Earlier this year, Northern Essex Community College announced a similar program in partnership with the Haverhill YMCA.

Gould said that the idea came up during a town hall Royal held on campus before the COVID-19 pandemic, when discussion turned to barriers people face on campus. Gould and

SEE **CHILD CARE** A7



# Child care

FROM A1

others wrote a proposal for the program, and after lots of work — figuring out everything from how to structure the program to what furniture to buy — the initiative will kick off in March.

“Gosh it took a lot of people to make this happen and I’m grateful that HCC’s leadership and cabinet were on board and heard our pleas,” Gould said. “It feels good when you can approach administration and actually make a change.”

The initiative, which will begin in a “pilot phase,” was aided by a \$100,000 allocation in the state’s budget that state Sen. John Velis, D-Westfield, secured for the college.

“For parents looking to begin or support their education, finding reliable child care is always a barrier,” Velis said in a statement. “This new program will help make a real difference in the lives of so many families, and I am proud I was able to advocate for HCC to receive these funds.”

HCC will now look to hire an interim director to run the program, which the college in-



GAZETTE FILE PHOTO

**Holyoke Community College professor Sheila Gould, director of HCC’s early childhood education program, sits in the college’s Itsy Bitsy Learning Lab. This spring HCC will introduce a free, drop-in service called the Itsy Bitsy Child Watch.**

tends to operate in-house. Gould said that the child-watch center will likely provide work-study positions for students in education fields. The college will create an advi-

sory team to make sure everything in the program is the highest quality, Gould said, providing interactions, activities and materials for a wide range of ages.

“It can’t be boring,” Gould said with a laugh. “It has to be awesome.”

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