

HOLYOKE

Child-watch program lets parents pursue education

State funding secured for March opening

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Sheila Gould calls her college's forthcoming child-watch program a dream come true, and she says many students who are parents will feel the same way.

"I'm beyond thrilled, I'm just so excited," Gould said of Holyoke Community College's Itsy Bitsy Child Watch, which is scheduled to open in March for parents who need safe and affordable supervision for their children while they pursue college studies on campus.

Gould is the director of HCC's Early Childhood Education program. By March, the school will be



Professor Sheila Gould, director of Holyoke Community College's Early Childhood Education program, sits in the college's Itsy Bitsy Learning Lab. In March, HCC will introduce a free, drop-in service called the Itsy Bitsy Child Watch.

one of just three state community colleges to offer a child watch for students, and the first in Western Massachusetts, she said. The program will be free.

"This is so great for our region,"

said Gould, who said the only other such services for community colleges will be at North Essex and North Shore.

The Itsy Bitsy name recognizes
SEE **CHILD-WATCH**, PAGE A2

Child-watch

CONTINUES FROM PAGE A1

"The Itsy Bitsy Spider" classic children's book. Gould and Liz Charland-Tait, lead coach for the Strong Start Early Childhood Education Professional Development Center at HCC, also used the catchy name for the Itsy Bitsy Zoomcast, a recorded series focused on early education.

The child watch will not be restricted to infants and toddlers. Because schools are sometimes closed while the college remains open — creating a child care dilemma for parents attending HCC — the program will be open for children six weeks through age 12, Gould said.

She said the organizational issues will be worked out before the opening, to make sure children of different ages have sufficient space and appropriate placing. Older children will have the opportunity for games and activities but also tutoring if needed, she said.

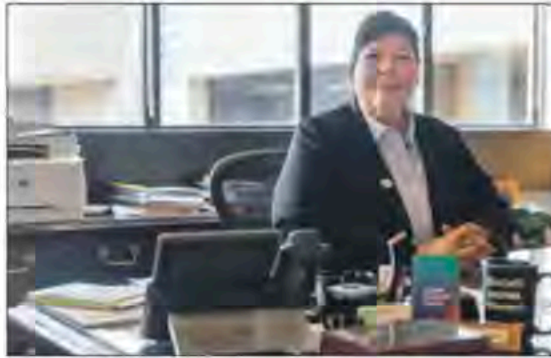
HCC President Christina Royal and Gould emphasized that the college is not getting into the day care industry. Children will be watched in short-term circumstances that allow their parents to attend class or fulfill other academic functions on campus.

"A parent cannot sign up their children for 9 to 5 supervision. We will be a safe, supervised and temporary drop-in center," Gould said.

"It's not our goal to be in the day care business. 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," Royal said.

"That is our focus, and it's been a long road to get here."

Parents will be required to be on campus while their children are being supervised. They will be alerted through a restaurant pager if they are



Christina Royal, president of Holyoke Community College, said child care needs are significant for students who are parents. (HOANG LEON NGUYEN / THE REPUBLICAN)

needed to return.

The pilot phase is being funded through a \$100,000 allocation in the fiscal 2022 state budget.

"For parents looking to begin or support their education, finding reliable child care is always a barrier," said state Sen. John C. Velis, D-Westfield, who worked to secure the funding. "This new program will help make a real difference in the lives of so many families."

He added, "I was thrilled to secure the funds needed to launch this pilot program, the first of its kind in Western Massachusetts, and I hope it can be a model for colleges and universities across the state. Finding dependable, affordable child care remains one of the biggest challenges faced by families across our region. This is especially true for parents looking to start or continue their education. This program will reduce those barriers."

The college is in the process of hiring a program director. Furniture and other materials have already been ordered.

Once a director is hired, the college will post how parents can apply to sign up for the program. That will be available electronically, Gould said.

The college will also get a better idea of how many children can be accepted,

as well as other logistical components. Days and hours of operation will be assigned based on student needs.

"We want to make sure the quality of the program is really great," Gould said.

The Itsy Bitsy Child Watch will not be part of the formal education curriculum, at least as it gets underway, but Gould predicts it will allow students access to service learning in safe, supervised surroundings.

For Gould, interest in the program speaks to her own personal experience.

"As a mom myself and a mom who is still going to school, child care is a real barrier. The more I got involved working here and advising, the more stories I heard from students who couldn't take a class or had to drop a class or had too many absences because of child care issues," said Gould, who lives in Holyoke.

The concept of a child watch on campus has been discussed for several years, but its need became more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many area child care centers closed down during the pandemic, and some never reopened.

"As part of our strategic plan, we've been focused a lot on basic needs, and one of those basic needs is child care," Royal said.

Royal has put student needs at the forefront of her policy agenda. In November, Holyoke Community College's Homestead Market became the first campus convenience store in the state to accept Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) cards for students receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.

One advantage in the college's favor is its physical layout. The child watch will be located on the first floor of the Marieb Building in a corner space that had been a child care center back in the 1970s, not long after HCC opened the Homestead Avenue campus.

"Historically, it was a preschool, so it's kind of exciting to bring this life back to that space. The main building is all connected, so it's really one building. That's why the restaurant pager system will work," Gould said.

The setup will be designed to closely match what is now in HCC's Itsy Bitsy Learning Lab, an early education program space set up to reflect preschool, with child-size tables, play areas and book nooks.

"Our plan is to create an advisory team to make sure everything that happens in the child watch program is the highest quality. Kids will get the absolute best in terms of interactions and access to activities and developmentally appropriate materials for all ages," Gould said.

Holyoke Community College has received two major early childhood education grants, the Career Pathways grant and the StrongStart Training and Technical Assistance Grant. Gould said HCC is one of only five colleges in the state, and the only community college, to receive StrongStart assistance, which is designed to support training, professional learning services and individual coaching.