

Leaders: Child-care programs that develop minds lacking

Shortage hurts county's ability to attract business, those at summit told

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As soon as Janet Perdue found out she was pregnant, she put her baby's name on the waiting list at the Greenville YWCA child development program.

Mason now is seven weeks old, and still waiting.

"The infant waiting list at any day care around Greenville, especially the good ones, is quite lengthy," said Perdue, a 37-year-old pharmaceutical rep from Greenville.

Grettel Blanco, mother of a 4-year-old enrolled there, puts it this way: "There's a critical need for it."

The shortage, not only for infant day care but for child development programs for children up to age six, hurts the Upstate's ability to recruit new businesses -- and cramps the potential of today's toddlers to become tomorrow's workers in an increasingly knowledge-based economy, business leaders said Monday.

"You are not going to have people move here to fill these high-paying jobs unless you have high quality child care," Barry Griswell, CEO of Principal Financial Group of Des Moines, Iowa, told about 250 business and community leaders and educators Monday at the third Annual Children's Leadership Summit.

The event, sponsored by the United Way of Greenville County's Success By 6 program and a host of businesses, nonprofit organizations and individuals, is a follow-up to a survey of child-care programs in the county five years ago.

The study showed that the county had a large supply of child-care programs but not enough of them provided high-quality child development, and space for infants and toddlers was in short supply.

The picture has improved since then, but not enough, said Laurie Rovin, director of Success By 6.

Between 2002 and 2005, the number of nationally accredited early childhood programs in Greenville County nearly doubled, from 11 to 20. But during that time, state funding for the county's First Steps program fell from \$2.4 million to \$1.1 million.

Griswell, who donated \$1 million to a child development program in Iowa, cited a study that said every \$1 spent on early childhood education yields \$17 return. He urged local businesses to take the lead on the issue.

"This is not one that government can handle alone," he said. "You've all got to pull together on this."

Bob Geolas, executive director of the Clemson University International Center for Automotive Research in Greenville, told the story of a company that planned to bring 200 jobs to ICAR.

"They didn't want to know about sewer hookups. They assumed that would be there," he said. "They wanted to know where are we going to find quality child care."

"I didn't have the answer."

Susan Lill, owner of AERIE Engineering, said companies can do small things that cost very little and make a better environment for workers with young children. She installed a diaper changing station and offers her 15 employees flexible work schedules.

Part of the difficulty in finding the kind of child-care program that develops young minds rather than merely babysitting them is the lack of a state standard, she said.

Of the 112 child-care centers in Greenville County, 20 are certified by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, according to the United Way.

Those programs, such as the Greenville YWCA, have standards for teacher-child ratio -- four to one for infants, for example, that offer young children greater opportunities to learn than in bigger classes.

Yet even in nationally accredited programs such as the Greenville YWCA, teachers generally don't have as much training and aren't paid as well as those who teach in elementary schools where it's harder to make such a big difference in a child's life.

"It's actually pretty sad that teachers aren't well compensated," said Melissa Windham, director of the YWCA center.
