

# Learning Together

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Glenda Ortiz couldn't understand why her 4-year-old daughter, Isa, wasn't speaking. Then Ortiz found assistance with the Family Connection program at Fairgrounds Elementary School in Nashua.

"They helped me find the right people to get her coded for speech therapy," she said. "They helped me feel comfortable at the school."

Isa is now 10 years old, talking and doing well in school, said Ortiz, 30. Now a mother of three, Ortiz said she's learned to become a champion for her children by utilizing the services available to them at school.

Annie Decker, a single mother of an 8-year-old and a 7-year-old, said she has been involved with the program for seven and a half years. She was able to earn her GED and take other classes, along with helping her children succeed in school by learning to read.

In the fall, Decker will begin pursuing a bachelor's degree.

"It taught me how to advocate for my children," she said of the program, "and it opened up opportunities for me."

For 12 years, the Family Connection program, located at Fairgrounds, Dr. Norman W. Crisp Elementary School and at the Adult Learning Center in Nashua, has been working with parents like Ortiz and Decker.

Parents are given an opportunity to further their own education by earning their GED and taking classes on parenting and other skills. At the same time, parents work with their children on improving literacy

skills.

But last year, the Even Start federal funding that paid for the program since its inception in 1995 was due to expire.

Sharon Dalton, coordinator of the program, and Gail Russell, a family educator, had spent last spring looking for alternative funding, but were coming up empty. It looked like last year might be the program's last.

But last week, Dalton and Russell were at the Adult Learning Center to celebrate, after getting news that a \$100,000 federal grant could keep the program going for another year.

### **Finding funding**

Parents from the program sat around a table and talked about how it has helped them and their children. U.S. Rep. Paul Hodes sat in the front of the room, listening to each of their stories.

Some of the parents spoke in Spanish and needed help with translating.

Hodes said he was able to secure the federal grant as part of the FY2008 Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations Bill.

The bill passed the House in July by a vote of 276 to 140, but it must now go through the Senate and be signed by President Bush before it becomes official, he said.

Speaking with the parents last Monday, Hodes applauded them for taking advantage of the opportunities the program offers.

"Frankly, it takes a lot of courage to ask for help," she said.

Hodes said that funding programs like these are smart investments because the families involved are more likely to lead successful lives.

"These kinds of investments, investing in parents and kids early on, means we won't have problems later on," he said.

Dalton said the Granite State Organizing Project played a significant role in contacting Hodes and looking for funding opportunities. The organizing project is a nonpartisan coalition of religious, community and labor groups and advocates for issues like affordable housing, health care and immigration.

Tess George, the regional coordinator of GSOP, said they became involved in keeping the Family Connection going because of the impact it has on reducing the dropout rate in Nashua.

When they heard the program was in jeopardy, "We really got to work," said George about writing letters and getting petitions signed. They heard from recently from Hodes about his securing the grant.

"The winners here are the children," she said.

### **Even support**

Even Start families are selected because one of the adults lacks literacy skills, and there is a child 8 years old or younger.

Families with low income levels are given a higher priority, Dottie Fair said. Parents may need to earn their GED or learn English, and at the same time, their children receive early childhood education services.

"All of those things happen consecutively," Fair said. "When a family says they wish to be part of Even Start, they sign on for all of it."

There is a 12-year limit on funding, and programs must reapply every four years. The aim is for school districts and other supporting agencies to come up with a plan to fund the programs once the federal grants run out. But as was the case in Nashua, oftentimes there isn't funding from the school district to keep the program going.

The funding for Even Start has dropped from \$1 million in 2005 to \$600,000 last year. For the 2007-08 school year, Fair said the state had about \$380,000 to work with.

"We've just seen an enormous decline in our funding," she said. "That means fewer programs and less services for families."

There were seven programs in the state that were receiving Even Start funding last year, including Nashua. This year, there are only three programs, said Fair.

When the Family Connection program first started and was at full capacity, Dalton said, they were working with as many as 50 families at a time. Last year, they were working with only 15 families, she said.

Dalton said there was some grant money set aside to keep the program going for the beginning of this year school year. Hodes said he doesn't expect to get final word on the grant until the fall, and Dalton said they should be fine until then.

"We do have enough money to go until the grant comes," she said, "but it is going to be a lifesaver because after that, we'd really be running out."

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