

Early childhood still benefiting from Kentucky tobacco dollars

FRANKFORT—A child care center is the last place someone may expect to see improvements funded by a lawsuit against tobacco companies. Well, unless the child care center is in Kentucky—the nation's second largest tobacco producer.

Sixteen years ago the Commonwealth earmarked 25 percent of its more than \$3 billion share of a health-related national tobacco settlement for early childhood development. Today, the state has the STARS for KIDS NOW (Kentucky Invests in Developing Success) voluntary quality child care rating system, credentialing of child care workers, daily home visits for around 800 at-risk families, child care subsidies and other early childhood programs to show for that investment, officials with the Governor's Office of Early Childhood told the Tobacco Settlement Agreement Oversight Committee yesterday.

STARS Assistant Director Darlene Hoover held up her office's program as one example of how tobacco settlement funding has improved early child care and education in the state since KIDS NOW began over 15 years ago. Hoover said 1,649 child care centers now participate in STARS which serves over 22,700 children on any given day.

"In 2016, we have reached 78 percent of our total childcare providers who are actively in a STARS quality rating system," she told the committee.

A new "Kentucky All STARS" quality rating and improvement system launched this year for all early child care programs receiving public dollars is replacing the old STARS program, Education and Workforce Development Cabinet official Wayne Lewis told the committee. The migration, made possible by a \$44.3 million federal Race to the Top grant received by the state in 2014, is expected to improve the quality of early childhood development in Kentucky even more.

When asked by committee co-chair Rep. Wilson Stone, D-Scottsville, if Kentucky All STARS will, over time, dramatically improve daycare, Lewis said he expects it will.

Moving forward, KIDS NOW may have less money to do its work than it did a few years ago. The program received nearly \$30 million in tobacco settlement dollars in 2010 and will receive around \$20 million for 2017, according Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence Executive Director Brigitte Blom Ramsey, who also testified before the committee.

"We're looking at a decline over an eight year period of nearly \$10 million. You know better than I that that's simply a result of the declining nature of the fund itself," said Ramsey. "But I did want to bring that to your attention—that those dollars dedicated to early childhood are naturally a declining source of revenue."

Ramsey stressed the importance of quality early childhood programs in Kentucky. "Because we know that quality really matters when it comes to the services that are provided to our young people if they are really going to be ready for success when they enter kindergarten," she told the committee.

Saying tobacco settlement funds for early childhood development has "made a difference" in Kentucky, Rep. Mike Denham, D-Maysville, encouraged continued support from his fellow lawmakers. "I encourage my colleagues to keep this funding in place, because it has made a real difference."

Committee co-chair Sen. C.B. Embry, R-Morgantown, also voiced his support for early childhood programs, saying quality care during early childhood "has great dividends over a lifetime."