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## Day care center gets a boost

By Ignacio Laguarda

**WALTHAM** - The Waltham Day Care Center once typified the problems plaguing most day care centers in the state, but now, it stands as an example of how to adapt.

The 39-year-old day care center recently received an \$180,000 grant to renovate its space, located in the basement of the First Parish Church in Waltham on Church Street.

Most of the money came from the Children's Investment Fund, a statewide organization that doles out money to early-childhood education and out-of-school-time centers to improve their facilities, and also provides technical assistance and training to nonprofit groups.

The Fund released a study a few months ago detailing how many day care centers in the state fail to meet basic requirements, and randomly chose 182 sites to examine.

The Fund found that many needed to improve in health and safety conditions for their students and teachers.

For example, the study found that fewer than 15 percent of programs serving pre-school children are in spaces designed for early childhood education and less than 10 percent are adequate for school-aged children.

Further, between 12 percent and 26 percent of the sites do not meet building code requirements either for walls, floors, windows or the roof.

The most common violation was in the condition of the floors, and only one of the centers met accessibility requirements for the disabled.

The study also found that one out of every five classrooms had no exterior windows and the same percentage had insufficient ventilation.

Before the renovation, the Waltham Day Care Center suffered from many of these problems, including inadequate learning spaces, poor air quality and an inefficient floor plan.

On Friday, Feb. 24, representatives from the day care center, Children's Investment Fund, and state Reps. Thomas Stanley and Alice Peisch, took a tour of the renovated facilities.

Peisch represents Wellesley and is the chair of the education committee in the Massachusetts House of Representatives.

Cameron Tucker, former director of the Waltham Day Care Center, led the tour.

The Waltham Day Care Center serves low and moderate-income families, and currently serves 38 children, from 1 to 5 years old, in three classrooms.

Tucker said that one of the most dramatic improvements to the center is right behind the main door. In the past, anyone who entered through the door would walk right into the preschool classroom.

"All of the children would jump up and run and greet you," said Tucker. "That was a tough way to teach a classroom."

To address the problem, the renovation created a hallway entrance, with an office where the preschool class used to be, and moved the preschool class to another location.

"It really did allow for a different kind of attention when you have an enclosed class-room like that; said Tucker.

Another major improvement was installing new bathrooms, to replace the previous restroom that was completely separated from the center. The walk to the bathroom was so long, the center employed a person to escort students.

New windows were also brought in, as well as lights, and the floors were all torn up and replaced with new plumbing.

Tucker said the renovations had a major effect on the students and the teachers.

"When you allow a teacher to just teach instead of manage, they get a greater sense of professionalism and that leads to an increased sense of teamwork," she said.

She said the majority of families who use the day care center are either from Waltham or work in the city.

"We are one of the great secrets of Waltham," she said. Mav Pardee, the director of the Children's Investment Fund, said inadequate learning spaces causes a number of problems for students and teachers.

For instance, because many day care centers are in renovated spaces such as churches, acoustics can be an issue.

"If children can't hear what the adults articulate, they're not getting the kind of support they are at a critical period in language development," she said.

Pardee said air quality is another major issue, and can hurt students with asthma.

Having sinks in classrooms can also prevent the spread of viruses. The center did not have sinks in the rooms before the renovation.

Pardee said there needs to be a public funding mechanism to help schools that do not have the money to make renovations through long term, low cost loans.

"The problem is big enough, and widespread enough and important enough that I think we all in society have an investment in where these children go to school," she said. "Part of quality improvement is making sure kids are spending their day in a space that really supports their teacher's ability to do their job, makes them feel good about themselves and makes their parents feel very confident."

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