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Education funds to help toddlers

By PAIGE AARHUS Advocate staff

Red Deer MP Bob Mills announced almost \$360,000 in federal funding on Tuesday for an education program geared towards toddlers. It's the first such program in Alberta.

About 35 people gathered at the Red Deer Public Library to hear the announcement. The money comes from a national initiative called Understanding the Early Years, a program that will see Canadian communities examine the educational needs of children under six. "I'm glad that it's here in Red Deer, it's one of 15 projects across the country and I'm glad that this is the only one in Alberta. That all makes us proud." said Mills.

The program has run for eight years, but this is the first time a site will be established in Alberta. Mills said that education is a top priority for he and his government. "It's an investment in young people and in families. We have strong commitments in our government; it's one of the most important things for us" he said.

The three-year program will identify service and information gaps, as well as resources available to young and future students. It will kick off when UEY gathers data on the backgrounds of youngsters from all walks of life. Mills stressed that emphasis will be placed on a diverse group including refugees, aboriginals and children from disadvantaged families.

In the fall of 2008, kindergarten teachers will conduct surveys assessing the education levels, personalities and backgrounds of their students. Program coordinator Laurie Lafortune said an information-based plan will be developed following the survey, which will allow educators to help young children meet their needs.

"We want to understand what are the factors that will help children to be successful at school. When they enter Grade 1, why do some children struggle and others do so well? Initially we may all think it's a cognitive aspect, that's it . . . but we know that that is not the only factor certainly" she said.

Mills said his background as a teacher made him understand the importance of early education. He lauded Red Deer's school system. Walter Lidster, Executive Director of Family Services of Central Alberta, said the program is designed to implement long-term plans and solutions for Red Deer's youth. Lidster said Red Deer residents can expect to see results from the program as early as next March.

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