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By ROBERT PIERCE

• Daily Leader

Liberal is one of three Kansas communities to receive a grant to help parents place their pre-schooler in the right environment.

The grant, provided through the Kansas Children's Cabinet, will allow USD No. 480 to partner with the Kansas Children's Service League's Head Start program.

USD 480 Federal Programs Director Laura Cano said the premise of the grant is to have three demonstration learning communities – Liberal, Rossville and Coffeyville. She said officials with the Children's Cabinet want to know how communities can work together with all the different agencies to provide early childhood education services.

"Instead of all the agencies working separately like the private day cares, the school and Head Start, they wanted to see how the three agencies working together would benefit the kids," Cano said. They funded three projects. They funded Coffeyville, Rossville and Liberal." Cano said work has begun with the agencies to see what can be done to make early education better in Liberal.

"This is our first year to be implementing, so right now, we're doing a lot of collaboration among the agencies trying to come up with a plan on how we can begin moving forward," she said. "So far, we've had quite a bit of success just opening communication between all of us."

Cano said Liberal received \$109,000 for one year, and applications have been made for another year.

"We are still waiting to hear if we did or not," she said.

Preliminary work on grant projects began in the spring semester of the 2008-2009 school year, according to Cano.

"We actually began our inclusion process with our special education students and 4-year-old at risk this year," she said.

Cano said she believes the grant will help the community have a place to serve the most kids possible.

"Right now, we're all working separate to try to fill the slots that we have," she said. "Instead of doing that, we're going to be working together to bring as many students an early childhood program, whether it's through a private preschool or a public school or through Head Start. We are going to be advocating so that every child who needs early childhood education receives it." Likewise, Cano feels this is the beginning of a bigger process.

"There is a dire need in our community for early childhood facilities," she said. "We have a lot of students out there who don't receive any kind of early childhood services."

Cano said Head Start and USD 480 has about 50 students on their waiting lists.

"I don't know about the day cares, but kids have to get on waiting lists," she said. "There is a huge need in our community for a day care/preschool that can serve all the other kids who can't be served through our program."

Cano said she hopes the grant will be a stage to get other people interested and the community can begin figuring out how to do many things, including bringing a new day care.

"After Kid Connection closed, that really hurt our community," she said. "We have a lot of young families who just don't have access any kind of to any kind of day care/preschool. There's only

so many slots we have available whether it's Head Start, the public school or private agencies." Cano said she would like to see conversations started from anyone with a vested interest in the community.

"Maybe we can begin talking about what can we do for all the kids who don't have a spot in one of our programs," she said. "What happens to them? We need to figure out something along those lines."

Cano said it was an honor to have been selected, and there were many people who were in the running for the grants.

"There were applications from across the state, but to our advantage, the Children's Cabinet, Head Start and the Kansas State Department of Education were looking for three communities that are very different," she said. "They wanted to see how the project would work with three different communities."

Cano said work began on the grant with her predecessor.

"She had started some of the conversations and making the state department aware of some of our needs," she said. "They knew of us from then. This has been a while in the making. A lot of conversations have taken place before the grant was actually written. We wrote the grant last year."

Cano said it is also an honor to receive support from the state education department and from Head Start.

"They're super helpful," she said. "They're just helping us see what is it that we need to do and how we can move forward. I'm really hoping this is just the beginning. I really want to see the community come together somehow so that we can address the needs of all the kids."

Cano explained the application process for youth.

"Children who come to the 4-year-old at risk have to qualify," she said. "They're at risk of not finishing school or at risk of not being ready for kindergarten."

Cano said qualifiers vary as to who is at risk.

"It can be a child who comes from a single parent home or a child who comes from people who dropped out of high school or children with families who have low income, children whose first language is a language other than English, whose parent was a teenage mom," she said. "All those kinds of things put them at risk of not being ready for school."

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