

## Transcript of Tracy Gruber

Interviewer

Tell us your name, your title and spell your name.

Tracy Gruber

Tracy Gruber. I'm the Director of the Utah Office of Childcare and the Senior Advisor for the Intergenerational Poverty Initiative. T-R-A-C-Y, Gruber, G-R-U-B-E-R.

Interviewer

Do you want that full title there?

Tracy Gruber

You can just do Director of the Utah Office of Childcare.

Interviewer

And your mission is to provide accessible, affordable, and quality childcare for Utah children. So define accessible, affordable quality -- just describe how this is done.

Tracy Gruber

Well, accessibility refers to family's ability to find quality childcare regardless of where they live in the state. We strive to make sure that there are quality childcare providers throughout the entire state, regardless of where you live, and that's part of our mission. Affordability refers to ensuring that low-income children have the same opportunity and access to quality childcare regardless of cost. And we do that by providing subsidies to low-income families based on income thresholds to ensure that they have access to that quality childcare. Quality refers to ensuring that families are connected to childcare providers that are focusing on delivering developmentally behaviorally appropriate childcare in safe settings. And we provide grants to childcare providers to make sure that they can establish that high quality that we want all Utah children to have access to.

Interviewer

Not just low-income, all children.

Tracy Gruber

All children.

Interviewer

So do you have quality control people?

Tracy Gruber

We have staff that have based on research and evidence, we have established curriculum and indicators of quality. Some we've worked in conjunction with the Utah State Office of Education when we're talking about quality and after-school programs. And our staff provides grants to programs and then goes in and helps them to establish a base level of quality based on research showing what matters in a childcare center or facility or provider -- even family friend and neighbor providers -- to ensure that they're providing that quality to all kids so that when they enter school, they're ready to learn.

Interviewer

Distinguish for us daycare can be three months to four --?

Tracy Gruber

Sometimes childcare providers are accepting children as young as six weeks, it just depends on the childcare provider. And it's up to them about what age they want to start accepting. And our office helps provide childcare and support from zero to really 17 years old which includes of course school-age grants and after-school programs.

Interviewer

I didn't know that. Youth City?

Tracy Gruber

Yes, Youth City is one program.

Interviewer

What is the cost range of childcare?

Tracy Gruber

I don't think I could actually answer what the cost of childcare is, because every provider establishes their rates. Depending on the provider, yes, it can be very expensive. I couldn't even give you an exact dollar amount because it varies so widely. Our office uses, does a market rate study every year to establish a general dollar amount for childcare and then we provide subsidy to low-income families up to a certain percentage of what that market rate reveals. And we do that study, I believe annually, to figure out how much our subsidy can reimburse families for the cost of childcare. But yes, it can be very expensive.

Interviewer

Talk about this program that's focusing on struggling families and small children. Talk about the children.

Tracy Gruber

Well, there are hundreds -- over 100,000 children in Utah that are currently living in poverty. And about a third of our children are at risk of being in poverty. That's a very high percentage. And there is no question that Utah compared to

the nation has a much lower child poverty rate but we're still talking about over 130,000 children that if not provided opportunities, will not be able to be contributing members of our economy as they become adults. And our office helps to ensure that all children and children that are in that situation are still provided quality childcare so that when they -- starting out from the very beginning, are interacted with in behavioral developmentally appropriate ways so that they actually have a chance at starting out and entering school ready to learn so that they are no longer part of that cycle of poverty. And that's really a huge part of what our office does is to ensure that regardless of what your income is, regardless of what your life circumstance is, and your struggles your families are facing -- if you find yourself needing to place your child in childcare or deciding you want your child to be in child care -- I know I did -- that they have the quality that they need in that environment, and are enriched in a way that sets them up for success going forward.

Interviewer

And quite frankly, people have to work. They need a place to take their children too. This is working for the parents as well.

Tracy Gruber

Yes. And even though we are about affordable, accessible, quality childcare, we're also about making sure that parents have the support they need to stay employed. That's a mission of the Department of Workforce Services, and we help with that by providing the childcare and the access to childcare that these families need so that they can remain employed, they can build their economic stability in their families while their child is also being appropriately cared for.

Interviewer

Talk about any partnerships or programs that support caregivers or parents in employment or education.

Tracy Gruber

Well, the Utah Department of Workforce Services provides employment support and job placement support for the adults. And as I said, the Office of Childcare then helps with the children. So we have an extensive program for those families. We also are doing something new up in the Ogden area where the families will have an opportunity to focus on the -- the adults will have an opportunity to focus on jobs and furthering education while we also are assisting with the kids, connecting them to preschool programs when necessary and after school programs, ensuring that they have access to health care and are regularly seeing their doctor. And we're partnering up in Ogden with all the other community resources. From the school districts to the physicians, to the nonprofits in the community that help with financial education courses. And childcare, of course, running the range from infant care all the way up through those teenage years, plays an important role in serving the needs of the entire family.

Interviewer

So this is a pilot project where you're centralizing all of the services for the family?

Tracy Gruber

Yes. We will have case workers that will work with the families and then help connect those families to other resources out in the community. And they will be based in one of the schools up in Ogden to provide those services. It's really a community partnership and a community collaboration to help families that need not just one -- you know, not just additional income, but also need all those other supports that help develop economic stability for the family that help the early childhood development of the kids, and ensure that they can be successful moving forward.

Interviewer

Are there programs that help parents understand the affordable care medical options, do you deliver that?

Tracy Gruber

The Office of Childcare does not. I can't speak to another area in department. I think most of the ACA is through the Department of Health.

Interviewer

So that would be called the Family Employment Plan?

Tracy Gruber

That would be one of our programs.

Interviewer

Can you talk about that?

Tracy Gruber

Well, the pilot in Ogden is called The Next Generation Kids Pilot Program. And it connects families that have been in our family employment program to this new model of serving families and working with the families to get what they need, and connect them to resources they might not be aware of.

Interviewer

Is that based on another successful program in another state?

Tracy Gruber

It really follows something that's getting a lot of attention called Two Generation Approaches to Poverty which meets the needs of the parents while also meeting the needs of the kids at the same time. Our family employment program, although it's a family program, really focused largely on connecting adults to job

and job training and education. And this pilot, The Next Generation Kids Pilot, we're looking at the whole family and looking at the needs of the entire family. So if the needs are to connect parents to jobs, which is what the family employment program does, and give them a program and a plan to get employed, we're also saying we know you might have other things going on in your family and in your lives and your kids might need to be connected to a quality childcare environment, we will look at all of those things. So not just the adult in the family, but also recognizing that the adult also has children that they are taking care of and we are going to be looking at that whole family.

Interviewer

What programs do you offer--parenting courses?

Tracy Gruber

The Office of Child Care does not have specific parenting classes. In some of our grants, when we're talking about making sure that there's a quality environment for kids to be in, some of our programs, the providers have a parent engagement curriculum that requires the parents to be engaged. That's usually in the area of children who are in preschool type childcare settings. A lot of the preschool programs, high-quality preschool programs do have a parent education component. Our office does not have a specific parenting curriculum that we have established.

Interviewer

So define and distinguish childcare, preschool, kindergarten and talk about -- kindergarten is not mandatory in this state, am I right?

Tracy Gruber

Correct.

Interviewer

Help people get an understanding because some people think it's all childcare. Talk about its funding, and its purpose and the hours.

Tracy Gruber

Childcare runs all of those. We're really talking about ensuring that children of all ages have a developmentally and behaviorally appropriate setting in which to obtain skills, whether it's academic skills or social skills. And it's really hard to say well one's -- when you're talking zero to five, that's childcare or daycare or once you move to kindergarten that's not. I mean all of these different programs or different services available for kids is really about providing children with the skills that they need to become successful adults. So in my mind, they're all -- it's a continuum of care from the early ages in infancy even, to once they become toddlers and then they're entering school. We all are providing a level of childcare on a continuum so that they can be successful into adulthood. So

that's why I have difficulty kind of teasing them all out because I see them as one type of program.

Interviewer

For the individual, for the child. So for the layman who doesn't understand childcare versus preschool -- is there public childcare? There's public preschool.

Tracy Gruber

Public preschool, yeah. Most of the childcare. But there's early Head Start which is a publicly funded program. So when you're talking about childcare I think in our minds we think of zero to probably three year olds. And I think the conventional wisdom is "that's baby-sitting." And our office would say that's not baby-sitting, that's providing important valuable skills at a very young age. We know that research says children start learning very early, much earlier than we ever thought. We don't wait until kindergarten to start that teaching. In the past, that was what we thought happened. Kids become five years old, that's when they're ready to learn. We now know that children start learning, really, as soon as they're born. So the environments that they're put in, if their parents are working or their parents need to have childcare, we need to make sure that even in those environments, even in those, what we would call childcare settings, valuable skills are being imparted to those children, valuable interactions that help them develop socially and develop language skills that they need. That all starts very early. So in typical childcare, that zero to three-year-old age, they're obtaining skills that will help them well into the future. And then they move on to what we would call preschool, what people commonly think of as preschool which has a set curriculum, they focus on the alphabet and base -- I hesitate to even say math skills -- but counting and numbers and very basic foundational skills that will prepare them and establish a solid foundation for them when they enter kindergarten. And yes, in Utah kindergarten is non-compulsory which means that parents have the option about whether or not they want to put their children into kindergarten. Many people want to keep their children home and that's a choice that parents get to make. Research shows that for a low income children, access to quality preschool and enrollment in kindergarten -- even full-day kindergarten -- is incredibly valuable to helping them achieve the same academic successes that middle income and upper income children are achieving. So those foundational skills, again, all the way back to zero, six weeks old, are very important. And for us to make sure that those childcare settings are providing those skills is a critical mission of our division.

Interviewer

What is your relationship with Early Head Start and Head Start?

Tracy Gruber

In our office Head Start is funded through a different grant through the federal government, but we do have a Head Start state collaboration officer on our staff

that ensures that the Head Start and Early Head Start programs are meeting their priorities and collaborates with those Head Start agencies throughout the entire state to work together to make sure that they're meeting the needs of the children and families that are in their programs. We don't fund Head Start through our office, but we do have this one person who's integral to making sure that the Head Starts have the support that they need and are connected to the community services that they need to provide to the children and families that are in their programs.

Interviewer

Where is the data that suggesting children are not getting adequate stimulation and care in their home?

Tracy Gruber

The biggest report or research that has been done on low-income children and the gap that they see is called the 30 Million Word Gap. And that was a national research project and I don't know the names of the researchers. But that project revealed that low-income children are hearing 30 million words less in their early childhood than their more affluent peers, their middle income and upper income families. And that research was really foundation to revealing the differences in the home environments of young children when it comes to interactions with their parents and the exposure to reading, in conversation, in communication that happens in low-income homes for a variety of reasons. And that has sent a whole movement really to try inspire low-income parents to read to their children every day, the American Academy of Pediatrics just came out with recommendations for parents to read to their children as young as six weeks old in an effort to try and close that gap. We also know that research shows that children who are attending -- low-income children who attend high-quality preschool programs, once they enter their traditional school years -- kindergarten through 12th grade are starting out more equal with their peers. And that research has also been extremely instrumental in connecting low-income children to high-quality preschool settings.

Interviewer

House Bill 96. Describe quickly what HB 96 is.

Tracy Gruber

House Bill 96 is really a key piece of legislation that was passed that is going to provide the opportunities for low-income children to have access to a high quality preschool setting. And it does two really important things. One, it provides funding for those preschool programs that aren't yet high-quality for any variety of reasons. And it allows them to receive some money and training and coaching to establish a high-quality curriculum that was developed by the Utah State Office of Education and the Utah Office of Childcare, to ensure that those programs are providing the right foundational support for those children so they're ready to learn. So we have those high-quality grants that are going to public and private

childcare providers to ensure they are developing high-quality curriculum for children and we're not just talking about math and science and traditional curriculum, but also imparting those important soft skills that kids need -- social skills that they need. And then the second component of House Bill 96 is that it provides some funding for about 720 low-income children who would not otherwise be connected to preschool, to attend a high-quality preschool program. And those two components are really an amazing change in Utah to connect our low-income kids to high-quality learning opportunities in the very early years so that once they enter that traditional school period, they've got the skills they need to be successful.

Interviewer

What is the tracking system for today?

Tracy Gruber

There will be a very similar tracking. It's still in development. The bill just passed so we're still working out some of that. But the Granite School is going to be a model for how they track those outcomes and we will be doing similar contract monitoring, monitoring with those programs going into those programs. All of the kids who are in those programs will get an assessment to see where they're at when the program starts and where they are at when the program ends, to see -- and during that period of time, they've developed some skills. And then we'll also have a way to track them over several years, once they enter their formal schooling, through a system between those programs -- the private and public preschool programs -- and the Utah State Office of Education. So we will be able to continue to follow those children who entered those preschool programs and look at their academic outcomes for really years to come.

Interviewer

So we've gone into Dan Fetzner's class. And we've also gone to Childcare Express, so there's the private places. Did you mention that money is also going to private?

Tracy Gruber

House Bill 96 is going to be providing funding and grants to not only the public preschool programs that we have in the state of Utah, but also to private preschool programs and private providers who have preschool curriculums in place in their programs.

Interviewer

Is there a waiting list for Utah's preschools of people wanting to get into these high-quality preschools and private schools?

Tracy Gruber

I don't know whether or not there's a waiting list. I do know that only 55 percent of Utah's three and four year olds are in preschool programs and that's lower

than the national rate. Not by much. I think it's about 61 percent nationally. So we know that there's lots of three and four year olds who are not in preschool. And again, it's really a parent's choice whether or not they want their children in preschool. So some parents will never select to put their kids in preschool. And we, the state doesn't have -- won't -- I'll stop there.

Interviewer

Do you know the success stories are for job placement?

Tracy Gruber

I don't know what the success stories are for job placement. I know that we -- you know -- the Utah, the Office of Childcare is able to connect families that come through the Department of Workforce Services, employment programs, to childcare and right now the office does not have a waiting list. And we provide two types of childcare for the adults. We connect adults in our programs through two avenues in the Utah Department of Workforce Services. We connect families that are participating in the family employment program to childcare and we also have childcare subsidies available to parents who are already working and need childcare support to maintain their employment and they can come to us and based on their number of hours and what their income levels are, we can provide childcare subsidies for those families as well.

Interviewer

Did I hear that there's maybe free childcare in between jobs?

Tracy Gruber

No, we're in development of a program to assist parents if they have a childcare subsidy and they lose their jobs, we are developing a new program to connect those adults to job search support to find a new job while also keeping their children in childcare and in the setting that they're comfortable in so that there's no disruption to the child when the parent loses the job. So we're going to provide, again, that two-generational support: Maintaining continuity of care for the child and that safe and secure environment, while also providing job support for their parents to help reconnect them and get them reattached to the labor force.

Interviewer

And why is two-generational approach important?

Tracy Gruber

I think what they're finding out with the two-generation approach is that families are complex and there are issues that involve the parents and involve the kids and rather than just select solutions to one of those, either the parent or the children, they have found -- research has found that working with both parts of a family are critical. And I don't think it's any surprise to any of us that parents are motivated by the success of their children. So if they have a child who's in

preschool and the child is learning, that in a lot of ways can motivate them to either go back to school, maintain employment, so that they can continue to support that child. And when you work both of those, both components together, the research is showing that you're seeing great success.

Interviewer

And the child in turn, is modeling the parent who is now studying. So it's working for both.

Tracy Gruber

It goes both directions. The parent sees the children learning and it inspires them to continue to support that child. And if a parent is in school or is working, the child sees those skills being -- within their parents and they aspire to do something similar. So it's really an interesting approach to dealing with families and poverty. It is no longer the case that you can just give families that are living in poverty additional financial resources because there are so many other complexities that cause a family or lead a family to poverty and have them stay there. And when you look at a two-generation approach and you're looking at the education outcomes for the children and the parents and you're looking at the health outcomes for children and parents and economic support, you realize that a family living in poverty needs all of those services and you can't provide one without also providing the other and expect that you're going to get positive outcomes.

Interviewer

There are some organizations that believe that childcare is government daycare. Can you speak to that at all?

Tracy Gruber

I think the role that government plays in being involved in childcare is to ensure that all children, regardless of the economic backgrounds that they come from, are provided that critical opportunity that they would not otherwise get. And government plays an important role in making sure that those kids have that opportunity because in the long run, when they have that opportunity, when they're adults, they're part of our economic system and play an extremely valuable role to our state and our society as a whole. So if they don't have that opportunity, and they don't have that support, then we're writing off, unfortunately, a lot of children and relegating them, in some circumstances, not all, to a much different childhood and **adulthood**. So governments' ability to be involved in childcare, which has been around for decades, has been critical to making sure that those kids do have the opportunities that their more affluent peers have.

Interviewer

Do you know other states that are doing well with programs, supporting children? Like Oklahoma with universal pre-K, have you heard?

Tracy Gruber

I'm familiar with states that have universal pre-K. I'm not familiar with the outcomes that they're seeing in those programs. I can tell you that research has shown that when low-income and children in poverty are given an opportunity to attend a high-quality preschool program, they are closing the achievement gap and that's national-based data and research that's been discovered across the board, starting as early as the 1960s with Perry Preschool Project showing those... Abecedarian project showing those outcomes for those low-income kids. And they are different from the outcomes that we see from middle income and upper income children who attend high quality preschool. You really are making a much more significant impact connecting those low-income children to high-quality preschool because a lot of the learning that goes on in middle income and upper income households takes place within the home. But as I said, there's a word gap that emerges for low-income children. They have different behavioral outcomes growing up in poverty and they are not starting out in that same way and they're not getting that support at home, and preschool provides that for them.

Interviewer

What are the critical measures of caring for Utah's children? What is at stake here for Utah's children?

Tracy Gruber

I think what's at stake for Utah's kids is that by not providing the supports and providing appropriate behaviorally and socially and developmentally appropriate settings for children to be in for all Utah children to be in, we risk adding challenges to them and creating more barriers for their lives. So what's at risk is that we are possibly taking 130,000 children who are currently growing up in poverty, and not putting them on that path to success and providing them with that unfettered opportunity to achieve great success -- that's paraphrasing a quote from Abraham Lincoln -- at an unfettered start in the race at life if we don't do anything. And I think that's not acceptable to us as a community, as a state, and it's not acceptable for us to be successful economically by not doing anything for these children.

Interviewer

Why should Joe Schmo care about Utah's children?

Tracy Gruber

Well I think Utah as a state cares deeply about children and families and just on a moral and cultural basis, children are extremely important. So I think that is why we should -- one of the reasons why we should care. We should also care because in the hard economic terms is that if these kids are not provided opportunities and not successful in their academic careers and not able to go on to maintain employment, then it hurts our economy. We will be paying, as

taxpayers, in a different way for these children. And Utah's economic success really is dependent on ensuring that all people in our state are contributing to our economy. So we have both of those factors -- the moral and cultural imperative to making sure that all Utah children have the opportunities that they need. And then we also have this more economic reality that if we don't do anything, then we pay in different ways for children who don't have those opportunities and aren't connected to our labor force when they're adults.

Interviewer

So how does a community support children and families?

Tracy Gruber

Well I think there's obvious ways that communities support families which is providing a high-quality educational environment for them to learn in. There is community activities and resources and safe parks and safe streets and support for your neighbors when you know that they're struggling and might have challenges and encouraging parents to be engaged and involved and recognizing that some parents are facing challenges that we might not be facing, but that they need community support. And of course you have religious supports and social supports and different mentoring opportunities. So there's a whole area of community supports that can come into play and not simply either the Office of Education or more kind of formal government ways. The community has a very critical role to play in ensuring that our kids are being raised in safe and appropriate ways going forward.

Interviewer

Lots of opportunities to volunteer.

Tracy Gruber

Lots of op -- yes, there are lots of opportunities to volunteer and Utah is the state that has the largest percentage of our people volunteering. So we are doing a lot as a community to help families in a variety of different ways. And that's fantastic. And there are always other ways that can help struggling families.

Interviewer

So the thing that you said you're good at, policy, what needs to happen in the state? Any policies that need to change or be amended or?

Tracy Gruber

I think we're definitely moving in the right direction. House Bill 96, as I said, was very important which provided the first real effort to connect low-income children to high-quality preschool and I think that's fantastic. And making sure that families know about the resources that are out there already to support them. And connecting families to programs that are administered by other agencies like the home visitation programs that the Department of Health administers. And

full-day kindergarten through the Utah State Office of Education. And our programs, the family employment program, and even knowing that we have childcare subsidy availability for parents that want to stay connected to employment. Those types of policies are in place and in some instances we need to be doing a more effective job connecting families that need those services to those programs. But I think we're definitely moving in the right direction and recognizing the value of starting children off on the right foot from really day one and the state is making great progress in that area.

Interviewer

You once said that for kids to be successful there needs to be a continuum of services every step of the way in their development. Can you say that again?

Tracy Gruber

I think ensuring that children are successful into adulthood is not a one -- a one solution approach. You can't just say, "All children need to be in preschool and that's going to solve everything." And you can't just say, "All children should be in kindergarten and that will solve everything." Ensuring that all children have opportunity and are developing age appropriately and getting all the supports that they need requires a continuum of services starting from the time, really, that the mom is pregnant with the child and makes sure that she's getting prenatal care on a regular basis, to ensure the appropriate development of that child from the very beginning. And then moving on to making sure that parents have the parenting skills that they need to give that child the support that they need while they're at home. And then if they're not at home, the supports within the community to ensure that appropriate care. And it doesn't end, it doesn't end with just home visitation for the young parent. It doesn't end with preschool. It continues on. And ensuring that these kids, once they enter the school system, have the support that they need, connecting them with mentors if they need it, particularly once they're entering high school and giving them job skills. It needs to be an ongoing and comprehensive continuum of care. And it's not government comes up with the solution for that continuum of care, it's really a community approach to making sure that those kids are provided the opportunity that they need.

Interviewer

Anything else you want to share with us? Anything that you feel like is important for the public to know?

Tracy Gruber

I think you asked the right -- I mean I think that why should people care is a critical question. There's too much focus on being like, "well it's just them, so why do we need to care," but it's really a -- so I think you already hit that.

Interviewer

One interviewee mentioned to build a child up you call the child by his/her name, you find out who your neighbor's children are, and build self-esteem for a child... this is huge. Anything we can do to make a child happy, smiling at a child. I was touched by that.

Tracy Gruber

I could make a pitch for our Care About Childcare website.

Interviewer

Please do.

Tracy Gruber

There's a great resource out there for Utah parents who might be considering placing their children in a childcare setting and that's at the Utah Office of Childcare's Care About Childcare website that provides information about all the licensed childcare providers throughout the state of Utah. It allows parents to look at quality indicators for these programs to see where programs are at with quality within their programs. And we encourage parents to checkout that website and contact our office if they are interested in childcare subsidies and learning more about what they need to do in order to qualify. They shouldn't hesitate to call our office and we can provide that information to make sure that regardless of income or ability to pay, that Utah children have access to those high-quality childcare settings throughout the state.

Tracy Gruber

Careaboutchildcare.Utah.gov.