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**WHATCOM COMMUNITY COLLEGE, SKAGIT VALLEY COLLEGE ANNOUNCE  
INNOVATIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAM PARTNERSHIP**

Bellingham, WA, Jan. 25, 2012 – Whatcom Community College, in partnership with Skagit Valley College, was awarded one of three statewide workplace-based learning grants to support an innovative education program for early childhood education adult workers who want to earn college credits and advance in their careers. Awarded by the Workforce Education & Training Board and the U.S. Department of Labor, the nearly \$200,000 grant will fund scholarships for assistant teachers and aides and those currently unqualified to progress in their careers due to limited credentials.

Early childhood educators teach and nurture children birth through age 8 in a variety of settings, including child development centers, family childcare homes and Head Start programs. Typically, these low-wage adult workers don't have access to career advancement because they are balancing the demands of work and family and may not have the financial resources to enroll in college courses. Yet, increasingly, experts are stressing the importance of professional development for these educators who instruct children at a crucial point in their growth.

Whatcom and Skagit Valley's cooperative effort, known as the Northwest Corner Professional Development Partnership in Early Learning, won the federal grant because it addressed the need for professional development via a workplace-based learning laboratory approach that provides students with a blend of classwork, on-line instruction, real-world experience and mentorships. The scholarships will fund tuition, textbooks and individualized support. Successful students will earn nine college credits and, upon completion, will qualify for advancement to higher-paid Lead Teacher positions on the Washington State Early Care, Education Professionals and School-Age Professionals Career Lattice. Currently, promotion from Assistant Teacher to Lead Teacher increases a beginning educator's salary from minimum wage to \$11 an hour.

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A total of 40 scholarships will be awarded to Whatcom Community College and Skagit Valley College applicants. Classes will start this spring; the program ends April 2013. Interested students or employers should contact the college in their community. At Whatcom, the contact is Sally Holloway, 360-383-3224 or [shollowa@whacom.ctc.edu](mailto:shollowa@whacom.ctc.edu). The Skagit Valley contact is Barbara Martinez Griego, 360-416-7787 or [barbara.martinez@skagit.edu](mailto:barbara.martinez@skagit.edu). Applications are due March 16.

The program idea grew from insights of Whatcom and Skagit Valley faculty members as well as input from employer focus groups. “Over the years, we’ve witnessed first-hand the value of having a community of what we call learner partnerships,” says Holloway, coordinator of Education Programs at Whatcom Community College. “If we can extend the experience and training of our Education Department faculty into the workplace, it bridges a gap and offers valuable support of new teachers. The scholarships and other funding supported by this grant allow us to do that.”

Holloway adds that education and support provided through the grant program offers significant benefits to employers, including reducing employee turnover rate and creating more productive, effective instructors. Employers with workers in the scholarship program will provide a workplace mentor, learning time for participating employees and, where possible, access to the internet for on-line courses. “With a little help, especially with access to flexible e-learning, these early childhood educators are more likely to engage with professional development and to have a chance at career advancement,” Holloway says.

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The Northwest Corner Professional Development Partnership in Early Learning grant is among the first the Department of Labor has awarded to an early learning program. “With this grant, the Department of Labor is recognizing the significant benefits of investing in the professional development of people who are working with our children at an important milestone in their lives,” Holloway says. The grant follows Washington state’s 2011 selection as one of nine states to receive Race to the Top federal funds. The \$60 million Race to the Top grant recognizes the importance of early learning and funds initiatives to improve early childhood education, including professional development. “If we can narrow the achievement gap and help these childcare workers to improve their skills, we are ultimately helping our children by providing them with better skilled teachers, who, in turn, furnish a great foundation before they enter the school system. It’s the best investment in human capital that we can make,” Holloway says.

The workplace-based learning grant is coordinated by the Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board. Whatcom Community College’s project partners are Skagit Valley College, Washington State Department of Early Learning, the Northwest Workforce Council, Service Employees International Union Local 925 and local early childhood education employers.

Whatcom Community College is an accredited, comprehensive two-year college with a committed, accomplished faculty and staff who serve more than 7,600 students quarterly. On its beautiful 71-acre campus in Bellingham, WA, and through on-line courses, Whatcom offers transfer degrees, professional and technical training programs, as well as basic education, job skills and enrichment classes. For more information about WCC, please call the Public Information Office at 360.383.3310 or visit [www.whatcom.ctc.edu](http://www.whatcom.ctc.edu). For more information about Skagit Valley College, contact the Public Information Office or visit [www.skagit.edu](http://www.skagit.edu).

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