Recent findings may change standards at Utah child care facilities

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Rich or poor, kids enrolled in child care facilities in Utah consistently score lower on proficiency tests in math than in English, according to research from Utah State University due to be published in November.

The finding is the result of a study conducted by Ann Austin, the director of the Center for Women and Gender, who has been studying child development since 1981.

"Within the economically challenged group, math is much lower than English preparation and literature preparation," Austin said. "But, between groups, between the advantaged and disadvantaged groups, it's also very poor. That's a very serious finding."

The study originally focused on the differences between poor and rich child care facilities.

"I did expect the economically challenged children to be in centers that were a little bit lower in quality, I really did," Austin said.

But not, she said, to the degree she found.

"I mean, I was astounded," Austin said.

Austin will present her findings to the Utah Office of Child Care in November. She hopes to spearhead an effort to improve mathematics by advocating for more parent involvement in their children's education and better instruction at the facilities.

Austin said the best solution is to address the problem at the source — mainly the child care centers. And the best way to accomplish that task, she said, is to build special-interest centers that would mirror the standards of schools with high numbers of children from low-income families. These schools, known as Title I schools, receive federal funding meant to help children who are at risk of falling behind academically.

"I think the providers need to be held accountable," Austin said. "On the whole, providers do the best they can do. But I think there needs to be more accountability for the critical situation the children are in."

Austin and the Child Care Professional Development Institute hope to receive funding to address the issue.

According to Leah Schilling, the program administrator for CCPDI, Austin's recent findings will help secure that funding.

"We can come up with these programs and see if these programs, anecdotally, are making a difference," Schilling said. "She's the one, researchers are the one, that prove it and have measurable outcomes."

Brionne Thompson, the co-president for the Utah Association for the Education of Young Children, is currently assisting Austin on the project.

According to Thompson, there is a need for Utah to be more aware of the kind of care that children are receiving — especially children from low-income families.
"I firmly believe that these critical years are the foundation for learning and development throughout the life of an individual," Thompson said. "The more we can learn about what children need during this time, the better we can provide for them, I hope, and ideally the better chance they will have throughout life."