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Speak Out for Kids!

A unique opportunity to help children



Cole Stetson, age 3, molds Play-Doh at the art center at Bell's School for People Under 6 and Under in Fletcher. Isabel Taylor, the director of the school, will participate in the upcoming Speak Out for Kids! gathering Oct. 20 at North Henderson High School. Sandra Adams / United Agenda for Children

Speak out for kids is sponsored by the United Agenda for Children, a coalition of citizens, civic leaders, business, government and community agencies who have united to make sure every child in Henderson County is safe, healthy and well educated.

By Sandra Adams

Special to TNW

Isabel Taylor has dedicated her career to helping working parents raise good kids.

She has owned and operated Bell's School for People Under 6 in Fletcher for three decades. Taylor, now 58, went into childcare after she began looking for day care for her own daughter, Catherine. "I was disappointed in the choices out there," said Taylor. "At the time there was very little regulation, there were no policies on class size and teacher ratios." "No public support system existed to keep track of teacher's qualifications, either," Taylor said. "When I opened my own center, I was careful about the way the day was structured," Taylor said. "I wanted the atmosphere to be similar to a mom staying at home with her children." "Today Bell's school is filled with happy little faces and voices taking turns painting, molding Play-Doh, sorting blocks, cutting paper, reading books and more. Given her background, Taylor is excited by the opportunity to participate in Speak Out For Kids on Saturday, Oct. 20 at North Henderson High School. "I am passionate about childcare," Taylor said. "I am so excited to have the chance to sit down with other

people in our community and talk openly about our children's issues."Speak out for kids is sponsored by the United Agenda for Children, a coalition of citizens, civic leaders, business, government and community agencies who have united to make sure every child in Henderson County is safe, healthy and well educated.

Its organizers envision a large community gathering with more than 300 people in the same room talking about children's issues and setting priorities for the community. Local school, health and law enforcement leaders will be there to listen to parents and others who care about children. The findings and responses from Speak Out For Kids will be included in a



Afton Rogers, age 3, looks on while Chole Raines, also 3, reads a book during center time at Bell's School for People 6 and Under in Fletcher.

comprehensive plan for action designed to bring the community together to address children's needs, said Maurean Adams, project director for the United Agenda for Children and director of the Children and Family Resource Center. Adams is urging residents from all geographic regions of the county, of every age, ethnic group and socio-economic class to attend the gathering to help compile the needs of Henderson County's children. Taylor, who works with some special needs children in her preschool, plans to participate and share her ideas. "It will be like a big pep rally for our children," Taylor said. "People will get excited and involved. And, more importantly, our county government will have an idea about what regular citizens believe are the real issues facing our children that they can act on." Taylor urges everyone in the community to get involved in the gathering. "This is the opportunity of a lifetime to make a difference," Taylor said. "From what I understand there will be real-time data collection and we will walk out at the end of the day with a priority list we created from our discussions that day." What's more, like Speak Out For Kids' organizers, Taylor envisions the day as a truly united effort. "All of us have the chance to hold hands -- parents, teachers, our county government, the faith community, retirees, businesses, civic organizations and community agencies, all working together," Taylor said. "This is a rare opportunity that

I've never seen or heard of before. **"Learning from others**

She's looking forward to hearing different viewpoints and participating in discussions with others who are excited about helping the county's children."One issue I believe is most important is to identify children who have special needs early in their education and get them help," Taylor said. "At risk children can be helped. They might just need a lower class size or some one-on-one instruction. Progress, if made early, can be permanent and can truly last a lifetime."Another issue Taylor sees facing our children is the need to provide for families who need public assistance."Even parents with lower incomes should have the choice of where to send their child for daycare and early childhood education," Taylor said.Hiring and educating more bilingual teachers is another pressing need facing this area."We are now a bilingual community and it would be wonderful to have children learning along side of the teachers in the classrooms from the earliest ages," Taylor said.Taylor also believes in getting children engaged and learning in the classroom."Children need structure and the opportunity to manipulate things and learn, not sit in front of a TV all day," Taylor said. Especially children under the age of 5.Taylor has always been interested in children's behavioral issues."I am fascinated with training and watching how education has changed and how teachers have matured," Taylor says. "Early education is so different from elementary education. Age 5 has been called the 'Age of Reason' because that's when a child is ready to go to kindergarten. But early childhood education is also very important. It can be the foundation upon which children, who become students, build their entire educational career." **Benefits needed for preschool teachers**

Jessica Cox, a teacher who works at Bell's School with Taylor, is a single mother of three. She has worked in childcare for more than 15 years. Everyone who works and attends the preschool calls Taylor, the director, Miss Bell."Miss Bell is a dynamic lady," Cox said. "I love watching her in the class room. She sees everything and is always aware of the child across the room, along with the one she is talking to. She is a total advocate for the family."Before coming to Bell's School three years ago, Cox stayed home after her youngest daughter was born and attended Blue Ridge Community College to get her

Associate's Degree in Early Childhood Education. During that period, Cox also started and operated her own business - a substitute referral program for daycare teachers. Her business connects people in the childcare field who are looking for part-time work. "I saw the need," Cox said. "Some centers do not have enough staff for anyone to take time off or be absent due to family situations. It is sad that the people who have such a passion for children can't afford to have a day off. My business helps centers provide that time off for their employees." Cox faces some challenges as a full-time working mom. "The biggest thing is having benefits," Cox said. "If your child is sick there is no backup plan. Low income families depend on their paychecks from week to week." Another issue Cox would like to see Speak Out For Kids! address is finding a way to help mothers and fathers finish their educations. "The low priority put on education also causes some working mothers and fathers to quit school in order to work," Cox said. "There needs to be alternatives for these families, so they can find a balance. Low income and low paying jobs create a cycle that can be broken with higher education." Cox also volunteers as the vice-chair of Bridge of Hope, an organization that helps at risk and homeless single mothers. "The 'Speak Out For Kids!' event will allow parents, such as these, to voice their opinions," said Cox. "Everyone is so different and can bring different viewpoints to the table. Real people have good ideas and it's great that they are going to have the chance to be heard." Although every child has the same basic needs, other needs differ from family to family. "Healthy parents equal healthy children," Cox said. "In order to have that you need to look at the whole family and their issues in order to decide what is best for the child." To help make her preschool even better, Taylor has gone back to school through Western Carolina University's cohort program to get her degree in early childhood development, from birth to kindergarten. "There is only one way to do childcare, and that is to do it well," Taylor said. "Today's children are the next generation. They will be looking after us and making the future laws. We need to give them a good start so they can succeed." *Sandra Adams is working on the United Agenda for Children campaign at the Children and Family Resource Center.*

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