Cabrillo Children’s Center hires director

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APTOS • After years of reducing schedules, class sizes and staff, Cabrillo College’s Children’s Center, an early childhood care and teacher training facility, has hired a director.

After a series of interim appointments, Tricia Pastor Cross was hired in August, after directing the child development programs in Live Oak School District for 20 years.

The hire signals the end of eight years of reductions, such as the 2010 closure of the two-classroom Baskin Center, said Jean Gallagher-Heil, Cabrillo’s early childhood education department head. Due to reduced state funding, the college has pressured the center to become financially self-sufficient, she said.

The program, which now runs its infant, toddler and preschool programs for 44 children out of three classrooms, no longer receives Cabrillo College funding, she said.

Unlike any other program in the county, the center not only provides half-day care for children 5 months to 5 years old, but also training for students and interns in Cabrillo’s early childhood education department. Most of the parents are Cabrillo students, who pay on a sliding scale, supported by state grants.

This year the center has three teachers, six interns and 29 student teachers, making for a nearly 1:1 child-to-adult ratio, said Pastor Cross.

What sets the center apart is its infant and toddler program, one of only five training sites for the Program for Infant and Toddler Care, a state-funded model for early childhood care, she said.

A steady stream of visitors fill the center’s observation booths each week, she said.

“We have many state preschool programs in our county, but we don’t have many high-quality infant-toddler programs,” Pastor Cross said.

The county only has enough licensed infant care providers to serve 6 percent of working families, according to Carole Mulford, Santa Cruz County Office of Education’s child development programs manager.

“People do other things, but is it licensed care? No. There isn’t enough of that and sadly, people have to make really tough decisions,” Mulford said.

Melisande Holingue was trained as a student teacher and intern at the center, and joined the staff as a teacher this year.

As a student, the hands-on experience with children allowed her to apply classroom theories and deepen understanding, she said. Teachers and children, in turn, benefit from the added help, she said.

“Just yesterday at circle time I took group of 12 children to visit the infant classroom and had student teachers to walk with me,” Holingue said. “That’s not something that would be possible if I was the only teacher.”

With so much staffing, elaborate activities are possible, she said. And each day, the adults meet to share observations, assembling a portfolio of test scores and detailed reports for each child, she said.

“It’s a play-based curriculum, and people don’t realize just how much learning and growing happens every moment in the classroom,” she said.