**Best of Public and Private Partnership Builds Strong PK**

Educare of Omaha Inc.
Omaha, Nebraska
Gladys Haynes, Director

**PROFILE**
Grades: Infant-PK
School Enrollment: 250
District Enrollment: 46,000
Community: Urban
Percentages of students:
• African-American: 75
• Asian: 1
• Hispanic: 10
• Native-American: 1
• White: 12
• Other: 1
Poverty rate*: 100 percent
English language learners: 10 percent
PK program location: Community
PK program funding: Philanthropic funding, school budget and Head Start

*Poverty rate determined by percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch

**PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS**
• Center’s PK program built a strong connection with the local school district.

• Beyond aligning to high standards, the center works to raise parent expectations.

• Extensive staff development and coaching builds teachers’ skills and knowledge.
A local foundation interested in promoting quality early childhood education and a school district eager for new avenues to build kindergarten readiness led to the creation of Educare of Omaha, a public-private partnership modeled on a program in Chicago. The Nebraska center opened in the 2002-03 school year and is seeing rapid growth. Built with best education practices in mind, the early childhood center, which serves 250 PK students from low-income families, already offers a model of promoting early literacy skills for children and families. Close cooperation with the Omaha public schools means the center takes part in professional development and alignment discussions with teachers and district officials.

Gladys Haynes, the program director, says the program offers a big bonus for families and the school district. “We have a superintendent who very much understands that a high-quality early childhood program can improve achievement,” she says, while noting that some school leaders might feel that strong PK programs linked to kindergarten readiness can only exist in a school facility. “One of the biggest obstacles to expanding quality in early childhood education is getting people to realize that if we keep building our own silos, none of us will have enough money to build quality programs that will make a difference.”

Educare combines philanthropic support, school district resources, financial support from local businesses, and resources from community agencies to build what leaders hope will be a top-notch program. While private funds were used to build the center, district funds pay operating costs.

The PK program keeps tabs on student progress through formal testing three times per year on 50 specific standards. Students are also screened on picture vocabulary, emotional skills and kindergarten readiness. The results of those assessments, along with teachers’ discussions about how students are picking up specific pre-reading and math readiness skills, help in evaluating student progress, and ways the overall program or the work of individual teachers can be modified and improved. “Our goal is that these children are ready to be active learners when they get to kindergarten,” Haynes says. “If you turn a child off in PK, you’re going to have a struggle the next 12 years.”

The Omaha Educare program not only points students toward the state’s academic standards but also incorporates Head Start performance guidelines in its alignment efforts. The program builds its PK program around the Omaha district’s PK expectations, which are aligned to kindergarten guidelines. The Educare staff is trained in the district’s learning goals and state standards, and the center sends its teachers to curriculum meetings for the Omaha district’s PK staff. Educare’s PK teachers also review the results of student screening after they start kindergarten to see “where kids are versus where they need to be,” says Haynes. Her own background as coordinator of the Omaha district’s early childhood special education programs helps open lines of communication with the district and gives Educare teachers a knowledgeable reference source.
Educare plans to track its students’ progress throughout their education as a way to evaluate and refine the program. Haynes says that Educare’s work with parents is also a key factor in getting children ready to make the most of their education. She recalls reading a study analyzing the low graduation rate among African-American students in Omaha and says its findings about low expectations underscored the shift Educare is trying to bring about. “I look at our kids and think that there’s no reason why almost every one of them can’t graduate from high school,” Haynes says. “We work a lot with parents to let them know their kids can be successful and that they [the parents] do have an impact on how their children are doing. We want to help them set their dreams high enough.”

The Educare center’s programs help parents learn about music, movement and art to help reinforce state standards and high achievement. The school also emphasizes reading. At one event, a speech and language pathologist offered families tips on how to read a book with their children and suggested a few activities families could do with the book. According to Haynes, nearly 160 families participated in that activity; the school gave the book to each family that participated. The center also offers free daily newspapers to families, handing out up to 100 per day. Every book in the school can be checked out to encourage reading at home. “One parent said to me, ‘If you want me to read to my kids, I have to have books,’” Haynes recalls. “So for almost any school activity, we give away books.”

PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP
A RESEARCH FOCUS WITH EXTENSIVE SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS, FAMILIES AND TEACHERS

As director of the center, Haynes manages its connection with schools and stays abreast of research about the development of infants, toddlers and preschoolers. She also addresses organizational issues within the school and has assembled an extensive list of support services to help families and students concentrate on success. “Foster grandparents” come to work with babies and read to older children. Another partnership delivers arts programs and activities. The center also creates links with medical and dental services, home lead checks, vision screenings, health care for adults and more. Educare keeps its new building open and available for community meetings and classes as well.

After four years leading the program, Haynes says her work is about creating a program that capitalizes on all research about what works with young children and giving the program’s students the best possible preparation for what will come next in school. Her vision is also a product of the Educare philosophy—originally launched by the Ounce of Prevention Fund in Chicago—and the mission of the Susan Buffett Foundation, which provided funds to build the center and start the program as part of its focus on strengthening early childhood programs in Omaha.

“We stay very focused on literacy and language, because for most of our children, that’s their greatest deficit,” she says. “We try to give them behavioral and emotional supports as well, but we know that better readers are likely to be more successful in elementary grades. We also said from the beginning that this is not just about working with children; it’s about working with whole families.”
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
EXTENSIVE COACHING AND TRAINING MIX WITH SMALL CLASSES

The most striking collaboration and alignment between the community-based Educare program and Omaha public schools may be teacher training. Educare’s PK teachers regularly attend training with district PK and kindergarten teachers. In fact, Educare builds 10 professional development days into its PK teachers’ schedules for these connections. Educare also brings in speakers for other joint meetings with district staff. When the Omaha district was adopting curriculum Educare’s teachers, not surprisingly, were at the table.

Teaching quality is a major priority for Educare, Haynes says. With best practice research as a guide, the center keeps a low child-to-staff ratio. Three staff members work in each room—a teacher with at least a bachelor’s degree and early childhood endorsement, another teacher with at least an associate’s degree, and an aide with at least 12 credit hours in courses on working with young children. Three staff members also work with each group of eight infants and toddlers. “We have great supervision,” Haynes says. A master teacher assigned to each classroom reviews lesson plans, helps teachers analyze student work and observes teachers for instructional help. Weekly meetings focus on curriculum and instruction.

Many of the Educare staff members are members of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and the center is accredited by the association. For her part, Haynes participates in quarterly meetings with Educare leaders from other states. She also stays on top of professional development issues. “Last year, we interviewed all of our staff members about how the year went, what we should emphasize, and what they needed. All seven PK teachers said they’d like more supervision. We’ve tried to support them with a coach or mentor, who can help them when things are going rough, an activity bombs or individual children are challenging them,” Haynes explains. “Supervision needs to help the staff mature and meet the needs of kids.”

RESULTS
MONITORING STUDENTS’ PERFORMANCE THROUGHOUT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

As a facility that ends at PK and has only a brief track record, Educare lacks firm numbers showing how it is meeting its goals. Not that they aren’t looking. Haynes says that when the school’s first crop of PK students finishes first grade this year, the center will closely analyze how well they are meeting expectations. In fact, the center hopes to track all of its graduates’ progress, even through high school, to see how their learning experiences have possibly helped them succeed.

In the meantime, the center’s PK curriculum, aligned with Omaha district’s framework, builds in assessments to show how students are doing. The center analyzes those results as part of regular staff development work. The center also uses a variety of off-the-shelf assessments to pinpoint students’ skills, school readiness and student progress. Educare teachers and administrators examine their PK students’ results through Omaha kindergarten screening. Those results are used by individual teachers to modify their classroom activities and as a guide to wider school discussions about improvement planning.
Haynes says the center looks forward to receiving more concrete results and state testing as evidence of whether the foundation built at Educare is paying hoped-for long-term dividends. “Thus far, we’re getting good reports,” she says. “Kindergarten teachers call us to say how well our students are doing, but we don’t ever brush our hands off and say we’re through with them.”