



EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Schools find success in welcoming littlest kids

Learning Community-Buffett Institute plan shows early progress

By JOE DEJKA

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Max Clark is just 2 years old, but he's already a familiar face around Pinewood Elementary School.

His mother, Erin Clark, said Max used to be known as "the cute baby in the car seat," who she hauled there with his older siblings, Makiela and Marcus.

Lately, his mother said, he's been attending "Drop in and Play" days at Pinewood, and it seems like all the staff and teachers at the school know his name.

"He's kind of a big man on campus, and he isn't even in school yet," Erin Clark said.

Max's growing connection with the Omaha public school is no accident. It's part of a plan to improve academic achievement for him and other young

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BRENDAN SULLIVAN/THE WORLD-HERALD

Pinewood Elementary staffer Tierra Stennis reads a counting book to Max Clark, 2, during a "Drop in and Play" session at the school. Max's mom, Erin Clark, is at right. At top, 2-year-old Angelina Mai played dress-up at Pinewood, and her outfit caught the attention of Mary Beth Pistillo of the Buffett Early Childhood Institute.

Early learning: Family engagement boosts performance of kids, teachers

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children like him.

Staff and teachers at Pinewood, where three out of four children qualify for free or reduced-price school lunches, have embraced a new philosophy of family engagement, Principal Kristi Reinsch said.

They were spurred on by an early childhood education plan that metro-area school superintendents launched in 2015 in collaboration with the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties and the Buffett Early Childhood Institute.

Aimed at reducing income- and race-based academic achievement gaps, the plan focuses on developing the cognitive and social skills of disadvantaged children, particularly infants and toddlers but also those in early elementary grades. Key elements include home visits for children birth to age 3, high-quality preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds, and best teaching practices in the lower elementary grades.

It also involves making schools more welcoming for families. At Pinewood, 63rd Street and Sorensen Parkway in Omaha, that meant opening up a drop-in room called the "Panther Den," a combination lounge, meeting place and playroom that Max and his mom visit regularly.

"We thought we were doing a good job with family engagement activities," Reinsch said. "But I can tell you that we have improved so much with that increased focus. No more is it thinking 'Oh, that's a future Pinewood Panther' when they come through the door. That's a Pinewood Panther now."

In addition to several Omaha educators testifying to the power of this new approach, a report issued by the Buffett Early Childhood Institute provides some evidence that children served by the effort are making academic gains.

Sam Meisels, the institute's executive director, said that although it's still early, signs are promising for the nearly 4,000 children in the program.

"We see progress in the achieve-

ment of these children," Meisels said. "We see progress in the performance of the teachers of these children."

The plan was developed by superintendents of the 11 school districts in the Learning Community in collaboration with Meisels and the institute at the University of Nebraska.

Twelve public schools in six Omaha-area districts participate in the most intensive level of the plan, financed by a half-cent property tax levy, which raises about \$2.9 million a year. Other schools and community-based caregivers can receive assistance and training.

A core principle is that schools should serve as hubs connecting young children and families to education and services.

Participating at the intensive level are the Bellevue, Douglas County West, Millard, Omaha, Ralston and Westside districts.

In these districts in 2016-17, 679 pre-K students were enrolled in 29 classrooms. Nearly 3,000 students

were in 155 kindergarten through third-grade classrooms, and 183 children were enrolled in home visiting.

To analyze effectiveness of the programs, the institute worked with researchers from the Munroe-Meyer Institute at the University of Nebraska Medical Center and the Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Sample groups of preschoolers were tested for vocabulary and academic gains over a year's time.

The tests showed improvement. On the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, which measures how many words kids know, the number of students scoring in the bottom 20th percentile decreased by 16 percent. On the Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement, 6 percent moved up and out of that lowest category.

The tests are adjusted for age, so the gains reflect more than just the fact that the kids are a year older, Meisels said.

It's significant, he said, that some kids in the lowest-achieving group gained enough to move out of that group.

In kindergarten and first grade, meantime, children made small gains in language skills, the report says.

"In general," the report says, "the largest gains were made by minority children and those whose home language was other than English."

The only exception, the report said, was slightly smaller gains by children eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch compared to their paid-lunch peers.

Beyond gauging academic gains, the researchers also looked at quality of the programs.

They reported that the quality of teacher-child interactions increased, families experienced high levels of support and schools focused more on family partnerships.

Administrators and staff increasingly view the school as a place for the whole family, the evaluators said.

"It's been a system change for us, of really thinking about our students at D.C. West coming to us as babies," Superintendent Melissa Polonic said. "And how we are

inclusive of infants and toddlers, wrapping them into what we're doing in school."

By communicating with families early on, schools are more likely to learn of issues that could hinder a child's success.

Polonic said her district has seen an increase in birth-to-3 special education, a direct result of the Buffett plan.

"We're finding those families earlier," she said.

Educators in her district are also thinking harder about equity, for example making sure that preschool fees don't deter low-income families from participating, she said. The district introduced a sliding fee scale this year based on family income.

Millard Superintendent Jim Sutfin said the Buffett Institute has helped advance the idea of the school as a hub and puts an emphasis on best practices.

That's important, he said, because his district wants kids to read on grade level by third grade. Fourth-grade reading gets more complex and requires greater comprehension, he said.

Reinsch said the changes at Pinewood have been big and small. The school already offered pre-

school, but staff and teachers have gotten better at getting to know the families, she said.

A by-product of getting to know families is that more parents are stepping forward to offer their help, she said. Through a more deliberate effort to engage parents, they've enlisted them to share their knowledge with kids, be they barbers, dental workers or experts on African-American studies.

The new way of thinking has brought a restroom change at Pinewood.

"I know that there are more elementary schools that have changing tables in their restrooms now," she said. "Mine being one of them."

Max should have a smooth transition to preschool, his mother said.

During "Drop in and Play" sessions in the den, Max is getting the feel of school, getting comfortable with routines like hanging up his coat and backpack, and learning to socialize with other kids.

He can read books with Mom or staff members, have a snack and play with a treasure trove of toys.

"It's helping him get into a routine and a habit," Erin Clark said.

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BRENDAN SULLIVAN/THE WORLD-HERALD

Cindy Wheeler, left, attended a recent "Drop in and Play" session at Pinewood Elementary with her three daughters, Addison, 4, Kenzee, 1, and Madalynn, 1. The girls got some reading time in with Pinewood Principal Kristi Reinsch.