

SPRING 2004

Policy Progress

Building Blocks for New Jersey's Youngest Citizens



A publication of the
Association for Children
of New Jersey's Early
Learning Initiative

Fulfilling the Promise of Abbott:

The Newark Lighthouse Initiative: Shining a Light on Quality

CASE STUDY

The sun gleams through the big windows, matching the bright smiles on parents, children and teachers as they arrive at the new wing of the Vailsburg Child Development Center in Newark. "It's like a miracle," says Dale Goodwin, director. "Except I know it's not. We worked hard every step of the way, to figure out every detail, so it would work for the children."

About 90 pint-sized 3- and 4-year-olds now attend prekindergarten classes in this new building, each classroom filled with state-of-the-art toys, equipment and child-sized bathrooms and sinks.

"It's a dream we had, and it's so amazing to see it all now, so concrete, finally a reality," says Goodwin.

Calling it "amazing" is no hyperbole in this section of Newark, a working class community struggling to hang on through one of the roughest economic downturns in the city's history. Unemployment in nearby neighborhoods now surpasses that of the Great Depression. Many local shops are down on their heels. Just a few blocks from the Vailsburg center, the windows of a drive-through Halal restaurant are boarded up, awaiting someone to take a risk on the neighborhood again.

But here at Vailsburg, the mood is expansive and hopeful, the children obviously cherished. Hugs arrive in abundance, as teachers shepherd them to the spanking new outdoor play space, where jungle gyms and specially-designed safety turf call out for the rough-housing and games of tag that quickly ensue. Not that every child smiles all the time, of course. Alissa, for one, skids and takes a tumble, then tearfully clings to her teacher, soaking up the reassuring words. But it's not long before she's back on the playground for more. "Our goal has always been to make the children feel as valued and important as they are," says Goodwin. "This new building is just the latest addition to our dream."



The Association for
Children of
New Jersey
35 Halsey Street
Newark, NJ 07102

Ph: (973) 643-3876
Fax: (973) 643-9153

www.acnj.org
www.kidlaw.org

And this part of the dream would never exist without the Lighthouse Initiative, she says, the brainchild of a coalition of eight New Jersey-based foundations committed to creating high-quality early education. In this joint venture, the funders agreed to commit \$1 million a year for five years to three Newark-based centers, in hopes of creating “centers of excellence,” showcasing the best practices in the field. These centers would serve as beacons of quality, as the state expands its pre-kindergarten programs.

The initiative was sparked by a ruling from the state’s Supreme Court in the *Abbott v. Burke* case, a long-running legal battle over education funding. The court ordered the state to offer high-quality public pre-K to all 3- and 4-year-olds living in 30 of the state’s neediest districts, in hopes of improving their chances of school success. Translated, that meant teachers with college degrees and a certificate in early education in every classroom. State officials also agreed to raise salaries of teachers in community based programs, in hopes of attracting and maintaining a highly-qualified, committed workforce. “That court decision didn’t just mandate preschool, but high-quality preschool,” says Annette Strickland, program director at the Schumann Fund For New Jersey. “It was the most exciting thing to happen in early education in New Jersey for years.”

But it was also a tall order. Many community-based programs lacked basic materials or decent facilities. Many teachers and staff did not yet hold college degrees and neither state officials nor early educators in the trenches had a real roadmap on how to meet the new requirements. The state did ante up the money for scholarships for teachers to get credentials, for example, but no guidance on how the higher education system might meet the increased demand.

In fact, no one even had a clear picture of just what a model program might look like.

“Early education in New Jersey has traditionally been so underfunded that most people in the state didn’t even know what high-quality programming looked like,” says Strickland. Worse, few programs had the money or expertise to assess their own strengths and weak-

nesses and create a plan for improvement. Nor did most have funds for professional development, new facilities or even basic books, toys and equipment. “We’d always been so busy just trying to stay afloat that we didn’t have the time to catch our breath and look carefully at the way we do things. It was always catch as catch-can,” says Kathy Pergentile, executive director of the Ironbound Child Development Center, one of the three Lighthouse Centers. “I’ve always been proud of the job we did, but resources were limited.”

That is what prompted funders to create the Lighthouse Initiative. “Abbott created the perfect moment for foundations to step in,” says Barbara Reisman, the Schumann Fund’s executive director. “With the state funding assured, we knew that quality could be sustained going forward. But we also knew there were many gaps in state support as new programs tried to get up and running, and as the existing ones tried to meet the new standards for quality,” says Reisman. “We believed some of these gaps could be filled by technical support and additional funding.”

So it was at Vailsburg, where the need for a new facility rose to top priority as part of the Lighthouse planning and assessment process. “We knew for a long time that we needed to expand, that more children could benefit from preschool,” says Goodwin. “But we didn’t have the technical support or the funds to do the planning.” With help from Lighthouse, she suddenly had the seed money to hire an architect, survey the neighborhood and come up with a sound plan for expansion. Through Lighthouse, she also made the connection with Rosie’s Kids, the foundation created by comedian Rosie O’Donnell, which agreed to fund the construction and provide grants for several more years as Vailsburg expands. “Rosie’s Kids chose us because we had done some good planning, had a good program and we were ready with the plan,” says Goodwin.

The timing couldn’t have been better. Waiting for the state to provide a facility has proved fruitless, given the statewide shortage of funds for school construction. “It’s not looking like the state is going to do much about the facilities as pre-K expands, except for programs

housed in the public schools,” says Amanda Blagman, executive director of the Lighthouse Initiative. “So it was wonderful to be able to provide a place like Vailsburg with the seed money to get a project going, to create a vision. Now that the building’s done, the space is so cheerful that everyone wants to be part of it.”

New Vision, New Planning

Creating a brand-new facility is exciting, but it is just one piece of moving the centers toward excellence. Indeed, both funders and the center directors agree that no seeds could be planted before the center directors knew where they should go, which is why the Lighthouse Initiative dedicated the first year to planning and assessment. “The state is mandated to do assessments, but there were no funds or expertise for most centers to do that,” says Cynthia Rice, senior policy analyst at the Association for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ). “And we came to understand this as one of the most critical steps in the project. Each center learned important lessons from this process that will definitely improve quality.”

That was certainly the case at Friendly Fuld Child Development Center, located in one of Newark’s low-income housing projects. The center long operated as a project of the local tenants’ association, a cheerful shelter with dedicated teachers and staff, thriving against the odds in one of Newark’s most troubled neighborhoods. Like many early education programs, Family Fuld never had the time or the money to conduct a thorough review of the curriculum and teaching methods, facility and program goals — not until the Lighthouse Initiative. And that once-over, produced immediate benefits for staff and children alike.

“It was a real eye-opener, especially as we reviewed the infant/toddler room,” says Claudette Ayers, now the center’s director. “We had a whole paradigm shift in attitude and approach. The teachers now understand their job as teaching instead of just babysitting.”

Subsequent on-the-job coaching by outside consultants taught the teachers how to use language to promote literacy, how to create more hands-on learning

Creating A Path To Excellence

The Lighthouse Initiative was the brainchild of eight funders and grant-makers in New Jersey, an effort aimed at helping three Newark-based programs become “centers of excellence,” that showcase the best practices in early education. The Lighthouse Initiative is staffed through a joint venture of the Association for Children of New Jersey and New Jersey Community Capital.

The unprecedented public/private initiative aims to build on the state’s massive expansion of public preschool programs, as mandated by the state’s highest court, in the *Abbott v Burke* decision. In that 1998 ruling, the Court recognized that high-quality early education can make a big difference in children’s lifelong prospects, boosting their social, emotional and cognitive skills. And, the justices said, every 3- and 4-year-old in the state’s poorest urban school districts must have immediate access to high-quality preschool. The Lighthouse Initiative provided a roadmap of how to achieve those goals.

Publicly launched in the spring of 2001, the funders agreed to make a 5-year commitment to the Lighthouse Initiative, providing up to \$1 million a year to promising centers, helping them attract the best teachers, best teaching methods and get the best facilities possible. The three centers chosen — Friendly Fuld Early Childhood Learning Center, Ironbound Children’s Center and Vailsburg Child Development Center — already had quality programs and strong leadership. With extra support from the new initiative, they could each reach their potential.

Lighthouse works to achieve its full agenda to:

■ **Strengthen leadership, both at the center and in the community.**

Strong directors can lead not only an individual center to excellence, but also an entire community. In Newark, the Lighthouse staff has already developed workshops, and other activities that help their own teachers, as well as those in other

centers, learn about teaching methods, classroom management and resources that enhance early learning across the city.

■ **Enhance professional development.**

New Jersey now requires teachers to get credentials in early education, but provides little in the way of hands-on mentoring and technical assistance. Nor does the state address the needs of infants and toddlers, under the *Abbott* decision who will soon be the preschoolers entering *Abbott* classrooms. Lighthouse helps each center address the areas of curriculum that need improvement, find technical assistance and mentoring to address weaknesses and encourage children’s learning.

■ **Meet the new state mandates as part of the public education system.**

Centers now have new mandates to fulfill, but little guidance on how to meet them — such as serving students who are disabled or have other special needs. “In the past, these programs did not have to serve children who had behavior issues or other disabilities, but now, as part of the public education system, they do,” says Cynthia Rice of ACNJ. The Lighthouse Initiative sponsored a workshop on the issue and provides ongoing advice to the centers on meeting this mandate, as well as other new state directives .

■ **Better align curriculum with public schools.**

This goal is at the heart of the state’s mission in funding preschool, but neither the Newark school system nor individual centers had the resources to address it in detail. Lighthouse provides technical assistance, in the form of experts and materials, to help each center implement a curriculum geared to the expectations of the Newark school system so children will be ready for school when they enter kindergarten.

■ **Improve facilities.**

At Ironbound, each received a “makeover,” which better met the needs of the children. At Vailsburg, whole new classrooms sprouted. Family Fuld is currently planning a new reception area and making better use of their space.

■ **Strengthen the teamwork at each center.**

The better the communication among staff, the stronger the program. That’s why Lighthouse has funded staff retreats, assessments that pinpoint issues in on-going management and worked to enhance communication among teachers. Every center now reports both better formal and informal communication among teachers, better coordination of curriculum and better understandings of how to meet state standards — all intended to help children learn.

■ **Provide support to Newark’s broader early childhood community.**

Through issues identified by the Lighthouse directors, Lighthouse staff have planned professional development opportunities for all of Newark’s early childhood stakeholders.

■ **Enhance community support.**

Research shows that children learn the most when their families are involved and centers thrive when the community is involved. The resources provided by Lighthouse help each center plan ways, large and small, to reach out to parents and the larger community to make sure children get the best early learning experience possible.

“It was our hope to fill the gaps the state could not fill, to support these centers who were already on the path to excellence,” says Amanda Blagman, executive director of the Lighthouse Initiative. “We can see that we are well on the way.”

experiences and to take a more individualized approach with these tots. “Now you see the teachers on the floor, involved with the children, attentive to their cues, following their lead to play with certain toys, learn certain words, do certain kinds of activities,” says Ayers.

The new, bright and lively “learning centers” also help foster language and learning in a way that engages children and yet lets them learn at their own pace. “The consultant taught the teachers to make the learning more child-centered, to let children set their own pace and pick and choose the activities that interest them,” she says. “In the past, we had much more group activity.”

The hands-on consultant also offers on-the-spot coaching, turning dry advice about individual learning into lessons that both the teachers and children enjoy. This kind of nonjudgmental support helps foster a rich learning environment for teachers and children alike.

“In the past, a teacher might have felt judged. Now they see the coach as a helpmate, someone who can turn ideas into concrete activities in the classroom,” Ayers says.

Those kinds of improvements are just a few of the benefits to arrive via the assessment process, according to Ayers and the other directors. As Goodwin at Vailsburg puts it, “You just don’t get the chance to do this kind of self-study much, and come up with a real plan for moving forward. The state required it, we wanted to do it, but we didn’t have the resources. For us, Lighthouse has meant the chance to look at the whole work environment, and set up goals and milestones.”

Most important of all, Ayers adds, the planning process invites participation and buy-in from staff and families alike. “Now we’re a team, and we’re talking as a community making change as a whole. That’s very important because change is hard for people. They want to be part of the process. They can feel threatened by the process. But this approach brought everyone along, by giving them the tools and support they needed.”



Better-Qualified Teachers

Good teachers are key to the quality of any education program, of course, and the assessment and planning at each of the Lighthouse centers includes figuring out ways to satisfy the new state requirements for getting qualified teachers into every pre-K classroom — and how to make sure they stay up to speed on both curriculum and methods. “This has always been the hardest nut to crack,” says Pergentile at Ironbound. “When you find good teachers, you are in competition with every other program to keep them. And once they get credentials, then we tend to lose them to the public schools.”

Abbott provided part of the solution, by funding both college education and better salaries for teachers.

But creating the “flexibility on the job” is a challenge for directors, and no one gave them a blueprint. How can they spare experienced teachers during the day, when they are frequently short-staffed already? How can they support staff who’ve never taken a college class before, and may have children at home to care for themselves? How do they prevent staff who get the credentials from moving on to the public schools, for jobs that require fewer hours and have better benefits?

“You have to value people, but that’s hard to really do without the resources,” says Pergentile. For example, she had long wanted to give teachers time off during the day to attend college, but it was difficult to find reliable substitutes to fill in, even with money now available for Abbott. “Lighthouse gave us more resources to plan this out. We now have a pool of substitutes that we have hired as part of our regular staff, with the understanding we will give them their own classrooms as we expand. It means we have a stable staff, better teamwork, a more predictable environment for the children and for the staff.”

Indeed, Ironbound now has a turnover rate of less than 10 percent, not only the lowest of any of the three centers, but lower than state and national averages. On average, most early education programs lose up to 30 or 40 percent of their teachers annually, creating unstable conditions for children, staff and families. “Everyone knows stability is absolutely essential for children, but it’s been hard to achieve up until now,” says Pergentile.

Just as important, she adds, is the technical support for professional development that arrives via the Lighthouse Initiative. “We now have the ability to bring people in, and to go to conferences that improve our teaching,” says

Pergentile. In the past two years, both she and her staff have attended seminars on a range of topics, from how to mainstream special-needs children to how to relieve stress in the classroom. “It’s basic professional development,” she says. “But we never had the time or money to do it.”

And the benefits accrue directly to the children. “When you walk into the programs, you see just how much this sort of professional development matters. Teachers are learning new ways to promote children’s literacy, how to expand vocabulary, how to create a print-rich environment,” says Blagman. “They also are sharing their own ideas and experiences and information, which is just as important.”

Inspired Teamwork

The goodies in the foyer at the Ironbound Child Development Center are another low-key sign of the high return on the Lighthouse effort. The cakes and cookies, juice and coffee, conspire to create a warm welcome. This center, a fixture in Newark’s Portuguese neighborhood for decades, has long been an anchor for immigrant families making their way in city. But these days, the sense of community is palpable, as parents grab a donut or a piece of cake.

“Adding those treats was just one of those little things that came out of the planning and assessment. We are more of a team now, more connected between ourselves and with our parents,” says Pergentile. “We communicate better. That definitely improves the quality of the program.”

At least part of that new connectedness grew out of staff retreats funded by the Lighthouse Initiative, getaways that included not just the teachers, but their entire families. “I’m not sure I ever understood the value of a retreat, but I now do,” says Pergentile. “Staff could get to know more about each other. That helps the communication and working relationships. Everyone came away energized and with a clear mind.”

With that ‘clear mind,’ the entire staff could examine the strengths and challenges in the program, in a way they

never had before. Everything from teaching methods, room set-up and design, goals, priorities and philosophy could be revisited, to create not only better coordination, but inspiration for the year ahead. And in the retreats, Pergentile and her staff came to trust the pay-off that had already been gained by regular communication with each other.

Teachers help each other problem-solve, compare methods, devise new lessons and tactics. Use of a new family worker to help resolve behavior problems is more common now. “Once you get teachers brainstorming together, they suggest new resources to help a teacher work with an individual student and family. Sometimes you need that more neutral adult to problem-solve, and that solution gets suggested by another teacher who hears about the situation. That’s the sort of improvement I mean,” says Pergentile. “It’s not exactly where we saw Lighthouse having an impact, but it has.”

Anyone visiting Ironbound certainly feels it from the moment you walk through the door. “You get the feeling of teamwork all the time at Ironbound,” says Blagman. “And it’s not just the staff that feels supported, but the families feel supported as well.”

Leadership Skills

Lighthouse has also supported the development of the center directors, giving them both the time and skills to develop leadership skills. “We now have the resources to add a few computers and hire someone to help with paperwork. That means I have more time to focus on coordinating the program, building the team, seeking out new funding,” says Pergentile. “You don’t even realize how much that means until you have the time. It’s like I can breathe now.”

Not just breathe, but blossom and flower, according to many observers. Pergentile has long been a respected member of the Ironbound community, but the resources from Lighthouse have afforded her the time to attend regional and national meetings and to reach out to the surrounding neighborhood, to

build more support, raise money, seek out possible new space and link arms with other ventures in sponsoring joint programs for teachers and families.

Similarly, Dale Goodwin, always a radiant force in the Vailsburg Community, finds the Lighthouse Initiative helps her to develop further as an administrator. “I always wanted to make the program better, and to meet more of the needs in our community,” she says. “but I didn’t always have the expertise or the resources at my fingertips. With Lighthouse, I have people I can call and if they don’t have the answers right away, they’ll help me find them.”

The new facility — along with an expanded infant-toddler program, new on-the-job mentoring for teachers, a resource room and educational director — would never have happened without the extra support. “Abbott provided a direction, but I don’t know how quickly we could get there without the Lighthouse Initiative,” she says.

Looking Ahead

Not only that, Goodwin adds, but she would never have signed on with Lighthouse, if the initiative had not been a multi-year commitment. “It takes time to make change, and I didn’t want grants that ran out before we were able to accomplish some real change,” she says.

Similarly, Ayers at Family Fuld sees much more to do. “People tend to resist change, so it takes time to make it happen,” she says. In the coming year she expects to focus on sprucing up the facilities. “I think when the center looks a certain way, when it makes sense and is welcoming, it says people care, it creates a respite for the children and the families, no matter what’s happening outside,” she says.

Family Fuld’s kitchen, bathrooms and outdoor area also need improvement, she adds, to make them more staff- and child-friendly. Indeed, at the moment, teachers and children must make do, as so many centers around the state have, with a small outdoor grassy space

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Association For Children of New Jersey
35 Halsey Street
Newark, NJ 07102

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surrounded by a chain-link fence and little outdoor equipment. Creative teachers make the best of it, making up jumping games and relay races that enhance motor skills, coordination and even literacy. But the play area still sits in the midst of a dreary neighborhood, within sight of abandoned lots. "I think we can create something that is more cheerful, and something that is more connected to the indoor space," says Ayers.

She adds that the on-going Lighthouse assistance will also lead to ever-more improvements in the infant-toddler rooms, and new coaching and

development for the pre-K teachers. "It's exciting to have the process ongoing," she says.

And so it is for the funders making it all possible. Lighthouse has already made concrete visible differences in quality, and the promise of more seems a foregone conclusion, given the track record so far. That's the exciting news for everyone involved. "We saw a chance to focus resources in a concentrated way, and to demonstrate what quality early education looks like from all angles," says Lata Reddy, vice president at the Prudential Foundation. "We couldn't pass it up."

This case study was written by Betty Holcomb. For additional information on the Lighthouse Initiative contact Cynthia Rice at crice@acnj.org or at (973) 643-3876.