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Educare: A Catalyst for Change

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Educare: A Catalyst for Change

by Lauren Sterling, Sheryl Peavey and Michael Burke

These public-private partnerships are the only way we're going to get there. It takes adults putting egos aside, putting historical differences aside, and saying, "Let's figure out a better way to do it." This—Educare—is a better way to do it and it's starting to become a real national model. (U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan at the September 17, 2009, dedication of Educare of Oklahoma City)

The Summer/Fall 2009 issue of *Maine Policy Review* (Volume 18[1]) provided a comprehensive view of the early childhood system in Maine—from public-private investments to child care, mental and physical health, home visiting, economic security, and data collection and analysis. Educare is a tangible model of how to put pieces of that system together so children, their families, their schools, and their communities all benefit. We are bringing this evidence-based, quality approach to central Maine with New England's first Educare center.

Educare Central Maine, located next to the George J. Mitchell Elementary School in Waterville, will open its doors in September 2010 and serve nearly 200 children and their caregivers with full-day, year-round early childhood services. Like all Educare centers, Educare Central Maine will provide center-based early care and education focused on dramatically improving student achievement for young children growing up in poverty.

Educare spans private and public sectors and highlights the recent federal focus on expanding quality early childhood experiences. The national, state, and local planning teams responsible for Maine's Educare Center are already looking to its policy improvements as part of the broader movement to change early childhood systems. Right now there are eight Educare centers operating in large cities across the country; four will open in 2010; and nine more are at early stages of development. With its cohorts, Educare Central Maine joins the national Bounce Learning Network in working to change federal policy and expand high-quality early education, with support from investors such as Doris Buffett's Foundation, Buffet Early Childhood; the Gates Foundation; the Kaiser Family Foundation; and the Kellogg Foundation

EDUCARE IN MAINE

How Educare Came to the State

Governor Baldacci's Economic Summit on Early Childhood in 2007 prompted an unprecedented collaboration of private funders, beginning with Doris Buffett, a part-time Maine resident. Impressed with Maine's efforts to improve policies and systems for families with young children, Buffett committed \$3 million as seed funds for an Educare center in Maine. The Bill and Joan Alford Foundation added to that funding with a \$2 million challenge requiring an additional \$4 million match to build the

facility and start an endowment. In March 2009 with legislative approval, Governor Baldacci committed \$2 million towards facility construction, using state fiscal stabilization funds. Of the \$11 million capital campaign goal, \$8.4 million will fund construction and the rest will start an endowment for long-term program sustainability with existing federal, state, and local dollars.

Maine's Unique Public-Private Educare Partnership

Unlike other Educare programs, Maine's Educare involves a unique partnership between government and private investors. Since August 2008, three planning teams have been working concurrently to reach the final goal of opening the first Educare Center in Maine:

1. The **local** partner members on the Educare Governance Board (Waterville Public Schools superintendent, Kennebec Valley Community Acton Program's CEO and its Head Start director, along with representatives from the Bill and Joan Alford Foundation and Buffett Early Childhood) oversee the newly formed 501(c)(3) non-profit and ensure the implementation of the core standards that define Educare.
2. The **state** planning team (the First Lady, three Children's Cabinet commissioners and agency early childhood administrators) works to amend public policy to align with and support the Educare core standards for program sustainability after the facility is constructed.
3. The **national** Educare team (representatives from Buffet Early Childhood, Ounce of Prevention, and the Bounce Learning Network) are now partners with Maine for research, evaluation, and national policy change.

C O M M E N T A R Y

Why Waterville?

During the planning for a potential Educare center in Maine, Waterville put forth the strongest proposal to become the demonstration site. Proponents noted a history of effective organizational collaboration between the public school system and Head Start. The proposal articulated how the Educare model could build upon this good partnership to better serve young children. Finally, the proposal provided deep and detailed data arguing for the need, based on the area's capacity issues, the number of underserved eligible parents with young children, and school-readiness data from school systems.

Who Will Be Served?

Educare Central Maine will be open to enrollment of children from families eligible for Head Start. It will also be open to children from families that are just above Head Start income eligibility guidelines, but who need quality care and whose parents are working or enrolled in higher education. Educare Central Maine will conduct a parent outreach and advertising campaign for the above-income-eligible parents and screen through interviews and an application process.

Children from high-risk, low-income populations typically score well below national averages on a variety of school-readiness measures and are usually several months behind their more advantaged peers developmentally. For example, comprehending basic concepts such as colors, letters, sequence, and self-awareness are skills often lacking in children from impoverished environments.

In the area of the state to be served by Educare Central Maine, 2007–2008 school readiness assessments of the

Waterville public schools reveal some disturbing realities about children coming into the K-12 system:

- 67 percent of the kindergarten students come from low-income families.
- In grade 3, 60 percent of low-income students did not meet reading standards and 45 percent did not meet math standards.

EDUCARE AS A PROGRAM, A PLACE, A PARTNERSHIP, AND A PLATFORM FOR CHANGE

Program

The Educare program is grounded in several connected core components to support optimal outcomes for children: research-based strategies and program evaluation; small class size and high staff/child ratios; high staff credentials; focus on language and literacy; emphasis on social and emotional development; continuity of care; on-site family support services; and interdisciplinary service delivery approach.

Research-based strategies are derived from decades of solid studies, including many of those cited by authors in the Summer/Fall 2009 issue of *Maine Policy Review*. They inform the curriculum, training, and program design and support the national multi-site implementation study of Educare and Maine's own rigorous evaluation process that will be conducted by the Muskie School of Public Service.

Small class size and staff/child ratios ensure high-quality, individualized care, build trusting and secure relationships, and support the child's developing identity. In the Educare model, this

child:adult ratio is 3:1 for infants and toddlers and 5.3:1 for preschoolers.

High staff credentials reflect the research that shows that children do better with better-educated teachers. Partnerships with schools, higher education, and government allow Educare centers to hire highly qualified staff, pay them competitive wages, and support their continued professional growth. Indeed, the professional expectations for Educare Central Maine meet those in Quality for ME (Maine's quality rating system).

Literacy development is a foundation for school readiness. Research shows that first-grade reading ability is a strong predictor of 11th-grade reading comprehension, vocabulary, and general knowledge (Cunningham and Stanovich 1997). The gap between children with "below average" and "average" vocabulary skills at kindergarten entry is extremely difficult and costly to narrow in later school years. Intersecting with family literacy principles, Educare programs provide frequent opportunities for parent education and family participation in language and literacy development.

Social-emotional skills—controlling one's behavior, getting along with peers, and asking for and receiving help—are essential for children to become engaged, successful students.

Continuity of care helps children experience the world as predictable, supportive, and responsive as they stay with the same teacher from infancy to preschool. Transitions are carefully planned to minimize disruptions in the children's lives and to ensure that parents, teachers, and children are fully supported.

Onsite family support services and voluntary home visiting address a child's

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needs in the context of the entire family. Educare builds on families' strengths to support parents as the primary nurturers and educators of their children and encourages parent involvement and advocacy in their child's education.

An interdisciplinary team approach means that staff and consultants will collaborate with area service providers to offer early care and education, health, nutritional, social, and other services that create an environment of acceptance and inclusiveness for all children, including those with special needs.

Place

Educare is a place that nurtures early learning and models exemplary, evidence-based birth-to-five programming. Educare Central Maine, a 35,000-square-foot LEED "Green" project, merges quality physical and program designs to provide children with environmentally sustainable and emotionally supportive group experiences.

Design examples for optimized learning include wide hallways, forming not only large gross-motor space but the pathway to classrooms organized as "community neighborhoods." Classroom windows maximize natural light and are low to the ground so small children can see out comfortably. Observation rooms abut each neighborhood and allow viewing of the teaching strategies and adult/child interactions that define Educare's program quality.

Partnership

Each Educare center draws upon all available public and private early care, educational, and financial resources to provide the highest-quality birth-to-five experiences for young children growing up in poverty. A key partnership aims at

generating a more skilled workforce. In Maine the Kennebec Valley Community College and the University of Maine at Farmington will conduct early childhood degree coursework onsite at the center. Wired for distance learning technology, the state-of-the-art early childhood professional teaching lab at Educare Central Maine will reach not only degree-seeking students, but also more than 750 early care providers regionally, thus supporting children in rural settings far from Waterville.

Platform for Change

Educare is more than a program of excellence that demonstrates what works—it sends the message that "the children and families served here matter and deserve an equal opportunity." Most centers, like Educare Central Maine, are built next to elementary schools to make a powerful statement that "children are born learning" and "the work here is about education." Furthermore, each Educare center is deliberately designed to show firsthand what quality, effective, and evidence-based programs for birth-to-five early learning looks like.

MEASURING OUTCOMES

Reviews of second-year Educare evaluation data from elsewhere in the U.S. demonstrate that the model appears to be working. It shows that children who receive the full five-year dosage of the Educare model score higher on standardized tests measuring vocabulary, literacy, and school-readiness skills. Among the findings:

- Social skills for kindergarten-bound Educare children average 60, exceeding the national average by 10 points.

- School readiness scores of kindergarten-bound Educare children average 98.8, nearing the national average of 100. Those children who entered Educare between birth and age two exceed the national average by five points.
- Using infant-toddler and early childhood environmental-rating scales, national studies of infant-toddler and preschool classrooms found average quality ratings far below those found at Educare.

Educare Central Maine leadership and staff hope to see equally promising outcomes. Outcomes will be evaluated both through the national partnership and independently through evaluation by the University of Maine's Muskie School of Public Service. In addition, school-readiness data will be collected annually to determine Educare participant measures compared with control cohorts in nearby programs.

INFORMING PUBLIC POLICY

Although we understand that the most substantial investments are made when we keep children from falling behind in the first place, it takes bold leadership to stem the flow that funds remedial services and to redirect monies to proven preventive practices. We hope that Maine's Educare center will demonstrate that we can create a financially sound early childhood "hub" through its unique governance, development, and operation all balanced on solid partnerships across private and public sectors.

Public will is needed to change from the way things have always been done. Each Educare center works with state

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child advocates along with the Birth to Five Policy Alliance and the First Five Years Fund to shift the mindsets of citizens and funders. In Maine, we are incorporating Educare elements into the state's child care quality rating system. We are following Maine's Business Roundtable recommendation to establish an even broader early childhood partnership that can leverage public and private funds and bolster early childhood services statewide. Indeed, even before construction is complete, Educare Central Maine's governance board has identified some policy recommendations for the state:

- Align funding policies to ensure continuity of service.
- Rewrite policy to decrease administrative burden.
- Increase reimbursements that support quality programming for low-income families—particularly infants and toddlers.
- Blend Department of Education and Department of Health and Human Services funds, including Federal Title I, to support a birth to 8 agenda.

Policy changes proposed through the development of Educare Central Maine can have a positive impact on all early childhood programs, especially those serving Maine's low-income young children. Supporting the quality, well-trained workforce and holistic family-centered services provided under the Educare model can position Maine as a resourceful leader at a time when economic crisis demands bold, well-informed, and creative change. 🐟

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