

One Step for Dallas, a Giant Leap for Texas Children An Overview of Educational First Steps' Aim to Improve Early Childhood Education in Texas

By Rio Romero, Research and Policy Coordinator

The fall months mark the peak of hurricane season, meteorological experts say. As evidenced by the recent destructions of Hurricane Ike, many more families in Texas must face the challenge of rebuilding their lives in the city they once resided, or begin completely from scratch. When families come to the tough consensus of moving to a different city after enduring a distressing event, thoughts come flooding of where to start and perhaps more importantly, how to even start a new life in a new place. For some individuals and families impacted by such devastation, three simple words have come to represent the beginning *step* needed to move forward and thrive in the place they now call home. It is these three simple words---*Educational First Steps*---that has served as a special gift for persons like Ms. LaToya, a mother of two and a Hurricane Katrina survivor who relocated her family to the Dallas area. In LaToya's experience, Educational First Steps has not only touched her life, but also her own children and the students she teaches. "Educational First Steps has helped in several ways. Honestly,

it's all from the heart, I can't ask to be in a better place."

One Childhood, One Chance

Currently, one in eight Texas working families live below the poverty line, while the ratio surges to one in two working families with at least one minority parent. In the most recent years, while the national percentage of children under age five living in poverty has stabilized at 21%, approximately 27% of Texas children below the age of five live in poverty. The proportion escalates to 33% for children living in Dallas County.

For Texas' youngest children, poverty acts as a significant barrier to attaining high-quality early education and learning. Studies have shown that children from low-income families are often behind upon school entrance and also experience limited vocabularies. Further research has shown that through an engaging, high-quality early childhood education program, children from disadvantaged backgrounds have a greater chance of achieving success. Despite

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Neighborhood Christian Learning Center

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this, many disadvantaged families are confronted with the difficult reality of finding accessible, affordable, and high-quality early education.

For this reason, *Educational First Steps* (EFS) has led the way in an effort to alleviate the effects of poverty on children living in Dallas and the disparities existing in education. Through a blend of support in the form of training, professional assistance, materials and furnishings, and unique learning programs, EFS has made the earliest years for North Texas children the best years. It has shaped the lives of Ms. LaToya's two young daughters, along with 200 other children impacted by hurricane destruction, who received child care assistance via EFS funding and support. Further, it has opened the doors of opportunity to thousands of low-income children and has lifted the knowledge and spirits of its own educators. At present, over 4,000 children and more than 650 early childhood teachers and directors are currently impacted by Educational First Steps' invaluable work.

Crafting the Vision to Make the First Step the Most Important Step

In the mid-1980's, David Munson, a local philanthropist and oil and gas investor, aspired to replicate the success of a local mission's efforts of providing early education services to underprivileged children, established by the Holy Family School in McKinney, Texas. Munson's interest in early childhood education grew as

he learned that the children involved in the mission's early education services performed exceedingly well in school, and a number of the students even graduated at the top of their class. As a witness to the mission's achievement of educating McKinney's disadvantaged children, Munson envisioned a similar program---on much larger scale---that would lay the groundwork for making high-quality early childhood education a vital ingredient to the success of a growing and increasingly diverse city: Dallas. By 1990, Munson, along with Sandra Estess and Joyce and Linus Wright, gathered together to create EFS, a nonprofit organization dedicated to enhancing the lives of Dallas' low-income families and future stars---its youngest children.

The EFS mission is to:

Improve the quality and availability of early childhood education for economically disadvantaged children.

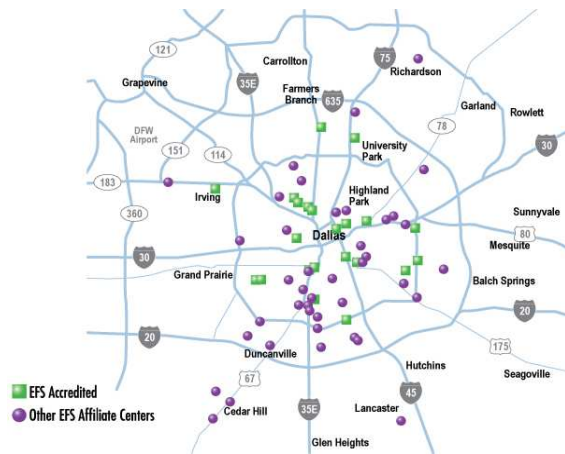
EFS partners with local child care centers, mostly from the low-income areas of South Dallas and Southeast Dallas, who wish to become affiliates and improve the overall quality of their early childhood programs.

EFS focuses on:

1. Providing training for child care directors and teachers in English and Spanish;
2. Supplying quality learning tools and materials;

3. Involving parents and families in their children's education;
4. Empowering centers to draw down more resources under the EFS umbrella.

The EFS program presently works hand-in-hand with 68 affiliate child care centers, 20 of which are accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) or National Association of Child Care Professionals (NACCP). In 2009, the organization hopes to expand the number of affiliates to 100, enabling them to reach out to more than 6,000 eager-to-learn children.



Educational First Steps' accomplishments are due in large part to the hard work, passion, and enthusiasm of its leaders, administrators, and educators. The community itself has also absolutely played an essential role in the story of EFS. By utilizing two of the city's mainstays---one being Dallas' strong commitment to philanthropy and secondly, having a solid business community---EFS has garnered the financial support of renowned national and local foundations and organizations, gracious individual donors, and corporate heavyweights such as American Airlines, Target, Kroger, and IBM.

Educational First Steps, with the aim to give impoverished children in local child care

centers the opportunity for success and high-quality, encourages its donors and partner foundations to invest in early childhood education in a variety of ways through financial contributions, in-kind gifts, and charitable event opportunities. To date, EFS does not receive any United Way or government funding. Regardless, Education First Steps strives for efficiency and is still able to assist thousands of children at a program cost of \$510 per child, in addition to exerting 83% of its total funds directly into its programs. As EFS continues to turn its pages and blossom into a prominent organization in the metroplex, Dallas' community of EFS believers and achievers will be there every chapter of the way.

Building a Movement—Step by Step

Compared to national figures, Dallas County faces unique challenges other than high poverty rates. According to latest U.S. Census report, children ages 0-4 years-old represent the city's largest age group and the most diverse cluster in regards to ethnic distribution by age group. This challenge is well-understood and valued especially by EFS President and CEO, Merriott Terry. Sitting in the organization's office, a Victorian home donated by the Meadows Foundation for a ten year period and located along Dallas' historic Swiss Avenue, Terry illustrates the need to provide educational support to the city's changing population, "It is the forgotten segment, but it is also the future workforce."

Over the years, the organization has worked hard to develop a way to nurture the needs of tomorrow's future. EFS has established a step by step, innovative approach to raise the level of quality of early education centers focusing on low-income children. The "Four Steps to Excellence" are outlined as follows for EFS-affiliated early education centers:

Step 1: Probation. A six-month step for all new EFS affiliates, which offers weekly training and mentoring.

Step 2: Working Towards Excellence. In this particular phase, centers are actively working to improve quality to the standards of national accreditation. Along with training and weekly mentoring, the center and its educators also receive scholarships and materials.

Step 3: Maintaining Accreditation Standards. After one year of accreditation, centers will continue to receive support from EFS.

Step 4: Community Partner. Once a center has achieved the final step of reaching accreditation or maintaining a quality equal to accreditation, EFS support is given on an as-needed basis. As with all the other levels, enrichment programs and training continue to be offered. Acting upon the meaning of *community* in this step, EFS hopes to soon institute a way for Step 4 centers to give back and serve as mentors to those centers in initial stages like Step 2.



All four steps combined function as the framework that holds the various features of the EFS model. This model to assist early childhood centers and educators in a comprehensive manner includes: mentoring, accreditation, quality learning materials,

enrichment programs, training, college scholarships, and parenting.



Gus, the EFS mascot, is named in honor of EFS Bilingual Education Specialist Gustavo Monsante, during his battle with cancer.

Stepping Up to the Plate

Mentoring. Education specialists are key to the sustainability and success of the EFS organization. Six well-trained specialists with experience in early childhood, of which half are bilingual specialists, provide on-site mentoring and guidance to affiliate child care center staff and directors. Each specialist is responsible for eight affiliate centers, located within a specific region of the city. The specialists serve as leader in teaching the principles of high-quality early education and also embody a source of close support. Maria Banda, a bilingual education specialist who has worked for EFS for seven years, describes her personal experiences with teachers in her affiliate centers. While Banda performs tasks such as role modeling for teachers, meeting with directors to look over upcoming schedules, and giving advice on appropriate room arrangement, she also goes beyond her part as an education specialist. Banda explains how she sometimes takes teachers to their training classes or assists them with making a phone call to a playground company. Getting involved may be a scary step for some of the teachers due to language barriers, she says, but Banda strongly believes that meeting them at their level creates an atmosphere of increased trust and support.

Accreditation. As previously indicated, children from disadvantaged families are vulnerable to receiving early care and education that may be of low-quality. EFS remains devoted to improving the outcomes of these underprivileged children by steering affiliate centers through the process of accreditation through NAEYC or NACCP. While several EFS partnering centers have achieved accreditation, eleven centers are currently under NAC self-study. Irene Beltran, director and owner of Redeemers Child Care Center, recognizes the value of a high-quality center to families and children, as well as in her own life. The unwavering guidance and support towards accreditation has, Beltran says, “helped us become a center that a few years ago I thought of closing, to where I’m now adding constantly to the building.”

Quality Learning Materials and Facilities. A high-quality classroom is not complete without developmentally, age-appropriate materials and furnishings that ensure children are able to learn, play, and interact safely and comfortably. EFS has continued to play an integral role in ensuring that children in EFS affiliated centers receive materials that foster an interactive, exciting learning environment. Lakitsha Proctor, director of Neighborhood Christian Learning Center (NCLC), knows that enhanced materials and furnishings can speak volumes and helps in heightening overall quality. EFS has helped to provide the center with supplies, books, and perhaps the children’s favorite---a brand new playground. In addition, EFS assisted in adding a computer lab for the young students and also a touch-screen computer system for parents to check-in and out their children as well as keep up with any messages or student records. It is not only a big help to parents, but it is also a help to the entire functioning of the center, Proctor describes.



Enrichment Programs. For several individuals, some of the most memorable learning experiences occur outside of the classroom. A stimulating trip to a zoo or children’s museum are unique ways of connecting classroom learning experiences to the outside, everyday world. However, many children, especially those from low-quality learning environments, miss out on the chance to expand their knowledge and experience through enriching, extra programs. EFS realizes the benefits of outside learning experiences for children, parents, and educators. For example, EFS-sponsored field trips have made visits possible to the Museum of Nature and Science, the Dallas Zoo, the Nasher Sculpture Center, and the Dallas Arboretum, for EFS affiliated centers free of charge. Other excursions include the Kids Too Center’s trip to California Pizza Kitchen, where each child created their own pizzas. The field trips have also made a world of a difference for centers such as Proctor’s NCLC, where students have been able to take one field trip a month to places like the aquarium. “EFS for our center has been like gas to a car---a car cannot go, cannot drive, it has so many great features, but without the gas it goes nowhere,” Proctor expresses.

In addition to field trips, EFS has also sponsored an annual Family Literacy Day for Dallas-area families to get together and enjoy literacy-based activities. The exciting event is filled with free books and reading-friendly entertainment by local performers and children's authors. Family Literacy Day is also a valuable way of linking parents to the importance of education and offering them an opportunity to connect with community resources. The event was particularly unforgettable for one Hispanic father who took the day off from work and rode the bus to the Dallas Arboretum to attend the event with his children. The father was able to end the day in full excitement as he had the opportunity to sign up and receive a library card, a resource he was surprised to learn was free.

Directors from EFS affiliated child care centers also gain positive experiences through the enrichment programs held by EFS. The organization invites directors each year to a Director Resource Fair, where directors network with other center directors and interact with a host of community organizations and vendors. Through this event, EFS instills the importance of providing support not just to the center or its students and teachers, but also to the director of the program.

Training. Professional, hands-on trainings for early education teachers and directors from affiliate centers are at the heart of Educational First Step's mission to enhance the Dallas area's quality and availability of early childhood education. Trainings are available across the Dallas community or sometimes onsite in affiliate centers. Teachers and directors have the opportunity to attend weekly trainings in Spanish or English on topics ranging from Diversity, Safety, Communicating with Parents, and Time Management. Directors also gather monthly for administrative trainings on matters such as Small Business Management

(hosted by Wells Fargo Bank). During my visit to EFS, I stopped by a literacy training sponsored by the local PBS station. Fifty teachers/directors and their EFS education specialists teamed up to listen and learn more about literacy activities and share ideas on building the vocabulary of their students. One segment of the literacy training included playing a clip from the Conan O'Brien show, which gave way to laughter but also connected to the training's theme and served as an interesting introduction to the next literacy training segment.



Besides director and teacher trainings on a number of target areas, EFS, a Touchpoints site, also offers Touchpoints training based on Dr. T. Berry Brazelton's model of child development and caregiving. The more than 16 hour training for EFS affiliated educators involves intense learning on how to respond to the developmental bursts of learning as a child grows and how to strengthen the child/caregiver bond.

College Scholarships. As a way to support and promote higher education among its teachers and directors, EFS provides college scholarships to use at any of the surrounding community colleges. The scholarships play a significant role in enabling EFS affiliate educators to increase professionalism and attain their Child Development Associate certificate (CDA), Associate's degree, or beyond.

Parenting. The EFS model reaches full circle as it involves parents and families in their child's learning experiences and education. In partnership with the local PBS station KERA, EFS offers parent trainings spanning from attachment, literacy, and temperament, across Dallas' EFS affiliate child care centers. Allowing parents to get involved in their child's education serves as a reminder that the family is a significant factor to the EFS equation.

Measuring Success Every Step of the Way

Educational First Step's focus on enriching the quality of early childhood education for disadvantaged children in the Dallas community is paying off. Children from EFS affiliated centers begin school ready to learn and ready to succeed. In partnership with the University of Texas at Dallas, a 2003 study comparing children of similar backgrounds who did not receive high-quality early education and children who had attended an EFS affiliate center prior to a Dallas public school, demonstrated:

- Higher scores on standard tests;
- Higher rates of promotion to the next grade;
- Lower rates of absenteeism and;
- Fewer referrals to special education.

More recent, extensive results following 1,600 (with a total of 6,500 to be tracked) EFS alumni children into kindergarten and first and second grade were released this fall. Preliminary outcomes conducted by UTD Professor of Sociology, Public Policy, and Political Economy, Dr. Richard Scotch, show EFS students from affiliated centers as scoring significantly higher in math and reading when matched up to Dallas ISD children in the early grades. With complete results to come in the near future, EFS has shown that educational success is not only possible, but certainly attainable for the youngest Texans who need it most.

A Golden Opportunity

"We are sitting on a golden opportunity, economically and educationally," Terry emphasizes. For a number of reasons, I viewed my visit to EFS as a homecoming of sorts, as I looked forward to see what my hometown of Dallas has done to help its underprivileged families and children gain access to high-quality early childhood education. Little did I know that I would walk away learning more than just about the facets of the program, but also be moved by its leaders, administrators, and educators---the EFS believers. Educational First Steps has made all the difference---whether for Banda, who began her incredible journey as an EFS Fellow who has now inspired her own *daughter* to work for an affiliate program, or for Ms. LaToya, who rose from being a mother of a student to eventually becoming a teacher at an EFS affiliate center. In many ways, I left Dallas knowing that I, too, have become an EFS believer.



For more information

To learn more about the remarkable work being done at EFS, please call Educational First Steps at 214-824-7940 or visit their website at:

<http://www.educationalfirststeps.org>.