

TribTown: Partnership helps troubled kids, families heal

Early assistance now may save money later, instructors say

By ANNA JOHNS Issue date: Tue, Aug 30, 2005

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People in the Hawthorne neighborhood may be surprised to see school buses dropping off youngsters at Edwards Elementary School when classes begin next week.

Edwards, 1715 S.E. 32nd Place, is one of five schools that closed last spring because of budget constraints. While the four other schools remain empty, Portland Public Schools is renting out Edwards for \$128,000 a year to Multnomah Education Service District, a county agency that provides special education services to the eight school districts in Multnomah County.

One of the programs moving in to Edwards is the Kerr Early Intervention Program, or KEIP, a partnership between the Multnomah County Early Childhood Program and Albertina Kerr Centers, an independent social services organization in Portland.

“It’s a partnership between education and mental health,” said Leslie Brown, clinical supervisor for KEIP.

While many of the county’s early childhood programs are educational, KEIP targets 3- to 5-year-olds who have emotional or behavioral problems.

“They may have had trouble in a day care, in a preschool or Head Start,” Brown said. “Or maybe the family is having difficulties and the child is put into foster care.”

KEIP kids may have mental disorders, including severe attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or they may have suffered abuse, neglect or trauma.

Children like 4-year-old L.A. Monge, who couldn’t be controlled by his Head Start instructors, can get help at KEIP.

“He was having really serious emotional outbursts and using a lot of profanity,” said his mom, Janine Hernandez. “I had to pick him up at school so many times because he was totally out of control.”

Hernandez, who is a single mother, works full time. L.A.’s outbursts were taking a toll on her emotions and putting a strain on her ability to do her job.

“I used to cry every night because I didn’t know what to do,” Hernandez said.

“It creates quite a hardship for families,” Brown said. “We try to get the child back on track so they can go back to day care or Head Start and their parents can go back to work and the family can function again.”

L.A. entered the KEIP program in March, based on the recommendation of his Head Start instructors and an evaluation by a committee of professionals. When he arrived at KEIP, therapists and instructors spent a lot of time monitoring his behavior. They played with him and asked questions about his actions.

“With little children you can’t sit and do talk therapy,” Brown said. “We talk about issues by acting it out with toys.”

“They talked to him,” Hernandez said. “They let time go on, and they saw what he needed.”

Therapists took a complete family history from Hernandez and learned that when he was a baby, L.A. witnessed violence and lived in an unstable environment. They determined that even though he was very young, L.A. likely had post-traumatic stress disorder, which is common

among the kids at KEIP.

“It took me a while after he was born to get my life together,” Hernandez said.

Once they understood L.A.’s issues, his instructors developed behavior plans for him that included social training to share and play with others and also to soothe himself when he got upset. L.A. and his mother entered into family therapy, which is a service KEIP provides for all 50 of the children it serves each year.

“We help parents understand what is causing the behavior and teach them how to intervene,” Brown said.

Partnership has a history

While Kerr provides mental health therapists, the county provides instructors with advanced degrees in special education, speech and language. It’s a partnership that has lasted 13 years.

The goal of KEIP is to get children ready — emotionally and academically — for kindergarten. L.A. has one more year with KEIP until he’s eligible for kindergarten.

“We’re taking care of him now so he doesn’t become a maniac when he’s 16,” Hernandez said.

Brown said intervention during the early years is essential because younger brains are still developing and personalities are not solidified.

“A lot of these children are in a sensitive period for learning and developing,” Brown said. “I believe we can prevent personality disorders and a lot of adult mental illness.”

New research backs up that belief. The ACE Study, recently released by Dr. Vincent Felitti of Kaiser Permanente, finds that childhood trauma may have a profoundly negative effect on adult physical and mental health. Felitti suggests that regular screening for trauma allows health professionals to treat issues immediately, which can mean fewer federal dollars spent on mental health in the future.

Voter-approved fund helps

That belief is what fueled the Children’s Investment Fund, a measure passed by Portland voters in 2002, which renewed its funding for KEIP last month. The fund provides \$8.5 million a year to social services in early childhood development, child abuse prevention and after-school mentoring. KEIP just received \$400,000 to continue through 2008. Before city funding came along, KEIP could only provide services to kids enrolled in the Oregon Health Plan. Now anyone is eligible.

“This (KEIP) is serving children and their families and preparing them to be successful when they get to kindergarten,” said city Commissioner Dan Saltzman, chairman of the fund’s allocation committee.

Saltzman plans to ask voters to renew the fund next fall.

“I think we’re doing exactly what we told the voters we were going to do,” said Saltzman, who points out that 95 percent of the fund’s budget goes toward social programs. “We’re serving upward of 10,000 children and their families in Portland.”

KEIP instructors are pleased with the move from the old location, a former nursing home with small spaces.

“It’s a school, so we’ll feel more like a school,” said Brown, who is excited to incorporate the nearby park, playground and community garden into the program.

Neighborhood kids also may be incorporated into the KEIP program as the older students

prepare to transition to kindergarten. While that possibility is still being discussed, another low-cost, integrated preschool program will open to neighborhood kids in January.

Multnomah County, along with supporting KEIP, also will conduct its own preschool classes at Edwards that include neighborhood children as well as children with speech, language, cognitive, motor or communication delays.