

Oklahoma City's new Educare Center aims to stop poverty cycle

Disadvantaged children get a better shot at school success

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An early childhood center opened Monday to target the poorest and most disadvantaged children at an early age.

Oklahoma City Educare opened at 500 SE Grand. The center will provide education, child care and services for children from birth to 5 years old.

Bob Ross, chairman of Oklahoma City Educare, said the intent is to stop the poverty cycle.

Quality child care can prepare children socially and emotionally for school, said Ray Bitsche, executive director of Sunbeam Family Services, which will operate the childhood center.

"If they're not prepared for that, they start behind. They stay behind. They drop out," Bitsche said.

Oklahoma City Educare has room for 200 students who qualify financially. Parents pay nothing for six hours of Head Start and will have a sliding scale for before- and after-school care. After children finish prekindergarten at Educare, they will be able to transition into kindergarten at Cesar Chavez Elementary School, which will be built just east of Educare through the MAPS for Kids program.

Oklahoma City's Educare is the first to have a mental health aspect, officials said. Licensed counselors work at the site as a resource to teachers to cut down on turnover and provide continuity for students, said Paula Gates, program director of early childhood services.

The site is also the first early childhood center in Oklahoma to be designated an A+ school, Gates said. The program provides training to help teachers integrate arts into curriculum, Gates said. Already, employees are planning art nights with children and parents, she said.

"We'll also be using that as a key component in parental involvement," Gates said.

Organizations like the Inasmuch Foundation and the George Kaiser Family Foundation got donations started for the \$9.3 million needed to build and equip Educare and Sunbeam Family Services will operate it, said Ross, who is president and chief executive officer of the Inasmuch Foundation. Tulsa has one Educare and another one in the planning stages.

Groups like Head Start, Oklahoma City Public Schools and other community organizations have contributed to the \$3 million annual operating budget. Organizers are still working to raise \$1.2 million for an endowment, Ross said.