

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION REVIEW

Sponsored Supplement
Early Lessons Propel a Movement
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ity in early childhood education and how to deliver it.

Over the years, we've seen a big focus on academics in preschools as a result of No Child Left Behind, and one of our values is to provide a balance to that approach, and remind parents and centers that play is the work of childhood, and that's where learning occurs. We have helped teachers and directors articulate this philosophy and feel validated that it's the right direction,

because they know it from their work with children every day.

People reading this article already understand the importance of early childhood education, and most probably already agree that a whole-child approach pays long-term benefits. But what we know only matters to the extent that it becomes what we do. We hope our work on center quality, accreditation, and whole-child initiatives provides a helpful roadmap for people ready to act. ☒

NOTES

- 1 Sarah Jane Glynn, "Child Care Fact Sheet: Families Need More Help to Care for their Children," Center for American Progress, August 16, 2012.
- 2 Daniella Miletic, "Childcare Workers Undervalued and Underpaid, Victorian Study Reveals," *The Age*, April 7, 2014.
- 3 First 5 Santa Barbara County Children and Families Commission was established when California voters passed Proposition 10 in 1998. Proposition 10 added a 50 cent tax on tobacco products, with revenues to be used to promote the healthy development of children prenatal through age 5.

Early Lessons Propel a Movement

☒ BY SUSIE BUFFETT

When I was growing up in the 1960s, my mother was not doing what most other women her age were doing. She was volunteering in the north side of Omaha, Neb., a tough but resilient part of town, helping to start Head Start, Girls, Inc., and several other ventures. Doing this, my mother (also named Susan) got to know people from all walks of life. She also gained a greater appreciation for the hand many are dealt. From her, I learned that getting to know people—their hopes, their dreams—makes you a better neighbor and, certainly, a better partner in co-creating solutions to complex social problems.

The challenges we face are daunting. Omaha's poorest babies live in pockets of high crime and concentrated poverty that rival similar areas in Detroit or Chicago. In fact, the percentage of African-American children living in poverty in Omaha is the highest in the United States, topping nearly 60 percent. The national challenges are equally dire: Poverty is worsening; about half of all US births are now paid for by Medicaid; and, for the first time in at least 50 years, more than half of the students in America's public schools are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

We can do better. Investing wisely in the first five years of life matters—big time. Furthermore, planting deep roots in the community, forming strong partnerships, and working effectively together has never been more necessary.

Over the past decade, I have learned a lot about planting roots and building strong partnerships through our work with Educare. Supported by hundreds of partners across the country, Educare is a network of 21 high-performing, well-evaluated schools serving more than 3,200 vulnerable babies, toddlers, preschoolers, and their families in 13 US states plus the District of Columbia.

Each Educare is locally owned and operated by a public-private partnership involving Head Start, Early Head Start, school leaders, parents, philanthropists, and others. Each Educare provides full-day, year-round, high-quality education and care. Seven years of consistent research findings show that Educare is a new proof point for the argument that starting early with strong beginnings can—and does—change life trajectories. What's more,

Educare is a catalyst for broader change, now reaching thousands of additional children and families by reshaping effective practices and policies at the community, state, and federal levels.

Educare, in fact, is an exemplar in the growing national movement to change how America thinks and acts when it comes to early education. And interestingly, our work suggests a striking lesson: The traits it takes to be a good partner in community work are the same social skills young children should learn as they grow and develop. Those include:

- Curiosity: learning to delight in discovery
- Confidence: knowing you are capable of accomplishment
- Communication: cultivating the ability to express what you think and what you want in clear, compelling, and respectful ways
- Persistence: forging your ability to "stick to it," especially when the going gets tough—and the going almost always gets tough
- Cooperation and Empathy: developing the ability to see, know, understand, and interact well with others
- Self-Awareness, Self-Control, Self-Regulation, and Reflection: honing your ability to wait your turn, manage frustration, and respond in measured ways
- Thankfulness: feeling and expressing gratitude

In very young children, these early skills are building blocks for later success in school, work, and life. Among adults partnering in communities and working collectively to propel a national movement, these skills are essential. And you know what? These are skills I remember my mom displaying. She passed away in 2004, at about the time our early childhood work was just taking root. The day she died, our friends and colleagues at the local Girls, Inc. in Omaha were building a new playground on their athletic field.

As word spread of my mother's passing, all of these little old ladies from the neighborhood began arriving at the playground, carrying plates of food—neck bones and gravy, macaroni and cheese, brisket—to give to "Ms. Susie's family." They came from throughout the community. All of these women. All of this food. And what they really were offering was their love.

That was a testament to my mom—and the kind of partner she tried to be in north Omaha. And it's a testament to the kind of neighbor—and champion—each of us has the potential to be. ☒

SUSIE BUFFETT is chair of the Buffett Early Childhood Fund. Over the past 10 years, the foundation has invested more than \$225 million in public education where America is most underinvested: the first five years of life and learning.