

# HELPING CHILDREN AND PARENTS SUCCEED TOGETHER

*An Update on the Dunbar Learning Complex*



IN 2007, the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Atlanta Civic Site brought together community leaders, local educators and a broad network of partners to plan a new learning complex that would provide area children with high-quality education from birth through fifth grade. Parents and residents worked with these partners and a number of state agencies, private funders and service providers to raise \$20 million to create the Dunbar Learning Complex — an educational hub housed within Dunbar Elementary School that works to ensure kids are healthy, thriving and developing on track.





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is one of two civic sites, along with Baltimore, where Casey has a special connection and long-term commitment to child and family well-being. The Foundation is particularly focused on a set of neighborhoods in the southwest corner of the city called Neighborhood Planning Unit V (NPU-V). In 2001, the Atlanta Civic Site team began working to increase opportunities for low-income families in the area by focusing on neighborhood revitalization, strengthening local organizations to galvanize community involvement and promoting high-quality early childhood education and child development.

#### The Atlanta Civic Site



Since opening in 2010, the Dunbar Learning Complex has been a beacon of opportunity for families in NPU-V. Supported by the Foundation and several public- and private-sector partners, the complex uses an innovative model to create opportunities for families by simultaneously equipping parents and kids with the tools they need to succeed, while removing obstacles in their way.

This two-generation approach is led by several key partners, who work collaboratively to coordinate services for children and families.

- **Educare Atlanta**, part of the highly regarded Educare Learning Network, is an early learning center operated by Sheltering Arms Early Education and Family Centers. It uses evidence-based techniques to deliver high-quality education, and offers programs and services that build skills and encourage parents to get involved in their child's early learning and development.
- **Paul Laurence Dunbar Elementary School** partners with the early learning center to prepare children and parents for the transition into kindergarten and to maintain academic progress.
- **The Center for Working Families Inc.** is a nonprofit housed next door to the complex that helps parents secure family-supporting jobs and increase financial stability.

## A SNAPSHOT OF DUNBAR FAMILIES<sup>2</sup>

The Dunbar Learning Complex also uses an innovative onsite health model — Healthy Beginnings System of Care — that helps families of young children navigate the health care system by connecting them to child health insurance, build and maintain relationships with their child’s primary care physician and make sure child immunizations and developmental screenings are up to date.

By working together, these partners can ensure children and families receive the support they need. For example, the Center for Working Families Inc. partnered with Sheltering Arms to provide parents who take part in job training or financial coaching with vouchers for high-quality child care.

The Casey Foundation has supported the Urban Child Study Center at Georgia State University to perform ongoing evaluations of the Dunbar Learning Complex. Early assessments<sup>1</sup> show it is achieving strong results, especially in preparing young children for kindergarten and in making sure their health needs are met. Partners will continue participating in rigorous evaluations to assess the effectiveness and outcomes. The findings also show the challenges of helping students maintain gains from early learning throughout elementary school.

This report describes those early findings while highlighting key elements of the Dunbar Learning Complex’s two-generation approach and the positive outcomes it has achieved for children and parents in the community.

We also provide early lessons and recommendations for organizations working to implement similar models.

97%

*of families are African American*

98%

*of families live at or below the federal poverty level*

64%

*of children lived in single-parent households*

25%

*of parents’ maximum educational achievement was a high school diploma or GED*

40%

*of parents were unemployed or working part time*

11%

*of parents worried about being homeless*

## A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

THROUGHOUT THE YEAR, the Dunbar Learning Complex buzzes with family-focused activity. More than 200 children ages 6 weeks to 5 years arrive each day at an early learning center housed in a modern and welcoming building filled with natural light.

“Loving, supportive adults can make a world of difference in a child’s life. We should ensure all parents have the tools and skills necessary to embrace that role and provide the best example possible for their kids.”

— *Ryan Chao, vice president of Casey’s Center for Civic Sites and Community Change*

The walls are decorated with children’s art and writing — a visual reminder of the importance of celebrating each child’s accomplishments. The day may include reading, art, science or math activities and recreation time in a well-maintained playground or indoor play area.

Right next door is Paul Laurence Dunbar Elementary School, which is connected to the early learning building through a towering atrium space that symbolizes the partnership between the two educational centers and their shared goal of helping children successfully transition from preschool to kindergarten.

Nearby, parents come to the Center for Working Families Inc. for a range of services to help them succeed in the workplace and build stronger families — including job assistance, educational training and parenting classes. Conveniently, many of the parents have children enrolled in the early learning center or at Dunbar Elementary School.

Throughout the complex, staffers from the various partnering organizations collaborate to give each child and parent the support they need to succeed in the classroom or in the workplace — a true two-generation approach. The integrated components of this strategy, and examples of how it works for families, are described in the next sections.

### High-Quality Child Care

With input from a range of experts, including the Foundation for Child Development, Center for the Study of Social Policy, National Black Child Development Institute, Voices for Georgia’s Children and the Casey Foundation, the Educare Atlanta early learning center — formerly known as the Early Learning and Literacy Resource Center — was created to meet the needs of local families who lack access to high-quality child care.





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A Focus on Two Generations

## HEN ABRIYA MCCRARY NEEDED

to find good care for her son, Blake, she had her eye on Educare Atlanta. But the wait list was too long. So when she was pregnant with her second child, she made sure to get on the wait list early. Trinitee, now 3, has been part of the Educare family since she was 6 weeks old. Blake eventually was able to join his sister. Now 6, he attends Dunbar Elementary. McCrary's youngest son, Brayden, 1, also attends Educare Atlanta. McCrary has received support from the Center for Working Families Inc. for several years, taking advantage of a job-readiness boot camp, classes in building resumes and practicing interview skills.

The center also helped her get back into school to follow her passion by pursuing a degree in early childhood education. One day, she was dropping her kids off at Educare Atlanta before heading to a job interview at another child care center. Her family support specialist, A'Rosha Stewart, saw her in the hall and asked what was going on. McCrary mentioned that she was on her way to a job interview but was very nervous. Stewart immediately took time to help her prepare. McCrary got the job. "I love the support they offer to families here," McCrary says. "You don't get that all around."



“One of the huge differences is our children’s interest in reading. We have always read to them, but because it is such a focus here, our kids really engage with reading now.”

— *Tamara Mason, parent*

State-funded child care assistance vouchers and other funding sources help many families send their children to Educare Atlanta, which offers all-day, year-round care to children ages 6 weeks through pre-kindergarten. It has become a critical support for working parents and those looking to further their education.

The family support specialist works with other staff at the center to ensure children are nurtured and receive appropriate health care, and that they are developing the learning and emotional skills they will need to transition into elementary school. That includes a focus on early reading as part of the statewide Get Georgia Reading Campaign, an effort to help all children in the state read proficiently by the end of third grade.

### Early Learning

Dunbar Elementary School, which is part of Atlanta Public Schools, works closely with the early learning center to ensure children can transition smoothly. Kindergarten teachers collaborate with pre-K teachers to help meet each child’s academic and developmental needs, and a week-long Educare Kinder Camp helps prepare children for the shift. Activities include a “chat and chew” with the principal, “a day in the life of a kindergartner” program and regular workshops on topics such as attendance and punctuality, curriculum and immunizations.

### A Healthy Start

Many children in NPU-V have chronic health conditions, such as asthma or allergies,<sup>3</sup> which can interfere with their ability to attend school regularly. Their parents often face financial insecurity and other stressors that make it difficult to obtain medical treatment. The Healthy Beginnings System of Care — which was established by several partners including the Casey Foundation, Sheltering Arms, Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta and the Georgia Department of Public Health — is helping Dunbar families address these challenges. During the 2015–2016 school year, Healthy Beginnings reported that 97 percent of Educare Atlanta children were covered by health insurance, compared with 92 percent statewide,<sup>4</sup> and 97 percent were immunized against childhood diseases, compared with just 74 percent statewide.<sup>5</sup>



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An Early Focus on Reading

## AMARA MASON FIRST LEARNED

about Sheltering Arms from a friend whose twins were enrolled at one of its centers. After visiting Sheltering Arms' Educare Atlanta site to see if it was a good child care fit for their son, Dubois, she and her husband Kenneth decided the program was the clear winner. The center was warm and welcoming, and as former teachers, Tamara and Kenneth really liked the curriculum, which had a good balance of age-appropriate milestones and play time. The Masons' 1-year-old daughter Chloe also attends the Educare Atlanta site. "The learning here is happening at a high level," Tamara Mason says. "We are just so thankful that our children are exposed to this high-quality education."

Sheltering Arms uses The Creative Curriculum,<sup>® 6</sup> a research-based approach that blends hands-on learning activities, quality assessments and professional development to build students' confidence, creativity and critical thinking skills. Chloe and her classmates often sing songs, draw pictures, paint and play with building blocks to explore new concepts. Tamara feels the education is paying off, noting that Chloe already has a strong vocabulary. "One of the huge differences is our children's interest in reading," she said. "We have always read to them, but because it is such a focus here, our kids really engage with reading now."



EDUCARE  
ATLANTA





“What makes this successful is having an expert focused on health care at the early learning center. That’s where parents are every day. We can provide health supports in an environment they’re comfortable with, from a trusted professional.”

— Susan Bertonaschi, director of Health Promotion and Healthy Beginnings with the United Way of Greater Atlanta

Healthy Beginnings recognizes the value of connecting young children and families to health care services and providing them with health education within the convenience of the early learning center. A registered nurse employed by Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta — known as a health navigator — works closely with families, providing guidance on how to enroll in health insurance and connecting them with other related direct services. For example, the navigator may join a mother on a call to a doctor’s office to establish a child’s treatment plan for asthma. Or, the navigator — who is often seen as a familiar face and trusted advisor — will help a parent better understand instructions in a discharge plan following a child’s visit to the hospital.

Healthy Beginnings also provides general health education. A United Way of Greater Atlanta AmeriCorps member serves as a health educator and coordinates health workshops and information sessions for families.

Until recently, a behavioral health specialist supported by the Fulton County Oak Hill Child, Family and Adolescent Center provided onsite behavioral health services to children and parents, consulting with teachers and other staff to identify those in need of assistance. Now, the services are available through Fulton County at offsite locations. Dunbar partners are exploring other behavioral health providers to bring the services back in-house.

### Helping Parents Succeed

With support from the Casey Foundation, the Center for Working Families Inc. opened next door to Dunbar Elementary School and the early learning center in 2006 to help NPU-V families secure family-supporting jobs and increase their financial stability.

The center serves hundreds of people each month, providing intense hands-on job-readiness and job-placement programs, as well as screenings for benefits eligibility and financial literacy instruction. Pathway coaches link families to a range of support services and resources in the community, including help with food, housing and utilities and education and workforce training programs. Parents enrolled at the center are eligible for child care vouchers so their children can attend Educare Atlanta, allowing them to focus on employment opportunities while ensuring nurturing care for their children. During



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A Partner and Advocate

## HEN MARIA OCHOA FOUND OUT

she was pregnant with her second child, she wasn't quite sure how to prepare for life with a baby and a job. Her counselor at the Center for Working Families Inc. — known as a pathway coach — was there to support her, encouraging her to sign up for the waiting list for Educare Atlanta early in her pregnancy. Her son, Emon, was able to start when he was 6 weeks old. "I love it here," Ochoa says. "We're all like family." This extended family has provided critical support for Ochoa in handling a crisis with Emon. Early on, Ochoa noticed her son was not meeting developmental milestones highlighted in the Milestone Moments booklet provided by Educare Atlanta. At 6 months, for example, he was not able to raise his head, and at 10 months she was concerned about his speech. Johnnie Thomas, Educare Atlanta's onsite health navigator, helped Ochoa enroll Emon in Babies Can't Wait, an early intervention program for babies with developmental delays. Nurse Johnnie, as everyone calls her, became Ochoa's constant adviser. When Emon's pediatrician said his development was not a major concern, Nurse Johnnie helped Ochoa find another pediatrician for a second opinion. Nurse Johnnie also

helped Ochoa set up visits with specialists, including a neurologist and geneticist. At age 14 months they diagnosed Emon with muscular dystrophy, a condition that is usually discovered later on, when a child enters school. Having such an early diagnosis allowed the team to better address Emon's needs right away, and they developed a plan of action. He now attends a special school in the morning, and a speech therapist and physical therapist come to Educare Atlanta once a week to work with him. Nurse Johnnie still helps schedule appointments with Emon's seven specialists and helped secure Medicaid payment for a necessary medication after an initial claim was denied. "It's so good to have her on-site," Ochoa says. "She's our advocate." Emon is interacting with his classmates more and getting ready to transition to preschool. And Ochoa continues to work to help her son progress. "She's really become the best advocate for her child through this," says Susan Bertonaschi, director of Health Promotion and Healthy Beginnings with the United Way of Greater Atlanta. "It's been a journey, but she continues to persevere."





A key goal of the Dunbar Learning Complex is to engage parents in their children's education and development, beginning in the early learning center and continuing as they transition into school.

the 2014–2015 school year, 85 parents benefited from the child care subsidy. The following year, that number increased to 150. The majority of parents enrolled in the two-generation program — 82 percent — maintained steady part-time and full-time work, earning between \$8 and \$22 an hour.

In addition to its focus on earning income, the Center for Working Families Inc. encourages parents to develop healthy savings practices. More than half of program participants had at least one month's worth of rent in savings and up to two months of savings for expenses. More than half of parents were in structured payment plans and meeting minimum payments, as opposed to being in default or making no payments at all.

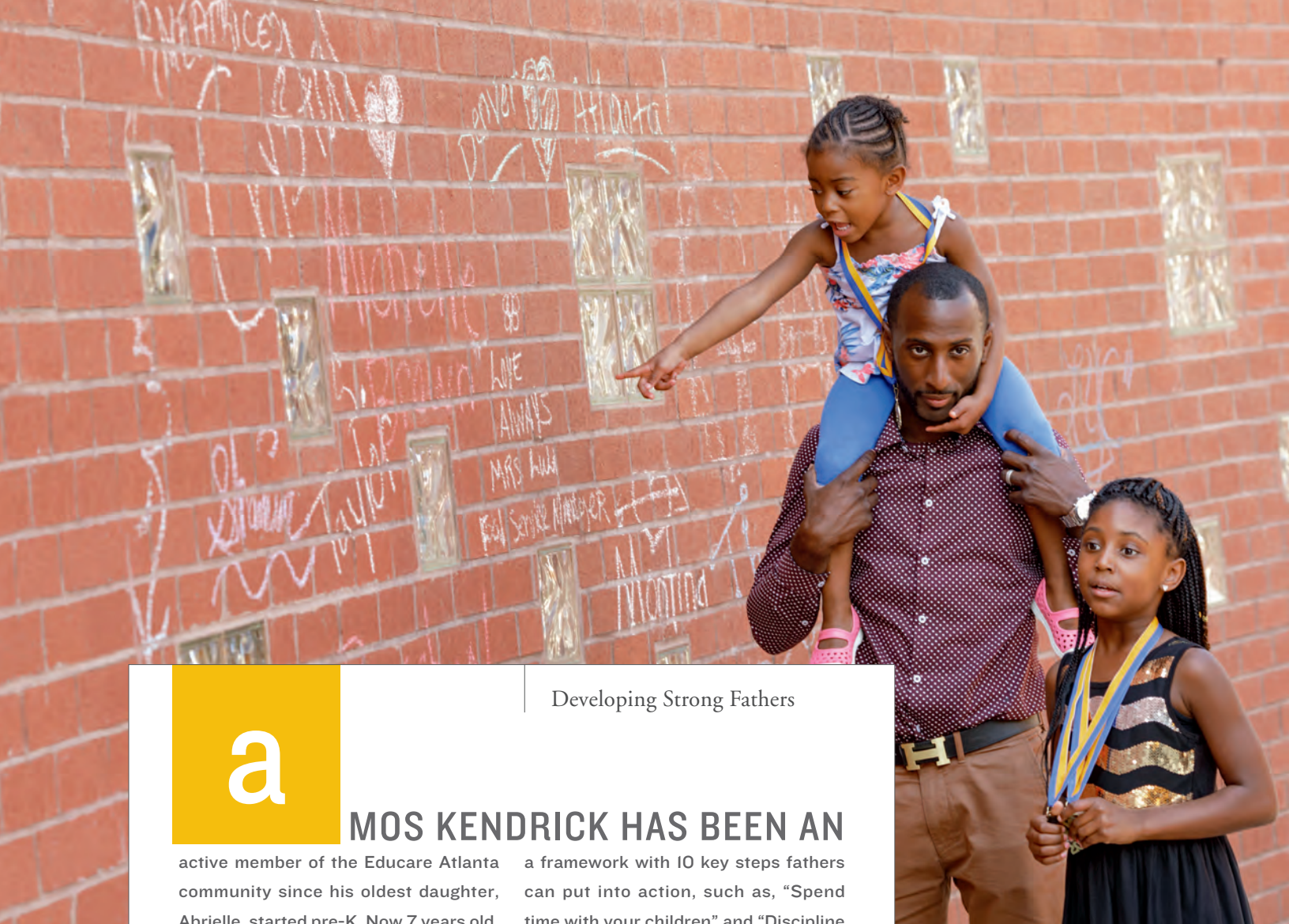
In 2017, the Center for Working Families Inc. merged with the nonprofit New Hope Enterprises and expanded its footprint to two Atlanta-area centers, providing residents in the surrounding communities with opportunities to build computer skills and quality training programs for careers in nursing.

### Parent Engagement

A key goal of the Dunbar Learning Complex is to engage parents in their children's education and development, beginning in the early learning center and continuing as they transition into school. The Parent Leadership Organization gives parents a vehicle to interact with the center and provide input on how it operates. The group also plans events to bring parents together to build new relationships and strengthen the social networks within the community.

Other efforts include parent workshops on topics such as setting financial goals and child development, and affinity groups like iMom, which builds social capital in the community by bringing mothers together to develop relationships and discuss issues such as self-esteem, jobs, parenting and health care.





## Developing Strong Fathers

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### MOS KENDRICK HAS BEEN AN

active member of the Educare Atlanta community since his oldest daughter, Abrielle, started pre-K. Now 7 years old, Abrielle is in second grade at Dunbar Elementary School, and her younger sister, Aaliyah, 3, attends Educare Atlanta. As an insurance agent, Kendrick's schedule is flexible, allowing him to spend time at the center, where he participates in programs like All Pro Dad and the Parent Leadership Organization. All Pro Dad meets once a month with the goal of empowering fathers to strengthen their marriage and family, and getting men more involved at school — either as teachers or volunteers. Rodney Lawrence, the family support specialist who runs Educare Atlanta's fatherhood programming, says “many fathers do want to be involved. But they may not know how or might not go about it in the best way.” The program provides

a framework with 10 key steps fathers can put into action, such as, “Spend time with your children” and “Discipline with a gentle spirit.” At the meetings, fathers discuss how to accomplish these steps and what each maxim means in their own lives. Kendrick feels his entire family has benefited as the program helps him build stronger relationships with his children, their teachers, his wife and other fathers. He also contributes to the program. “I volunteer a lot — reading to kids, helping teachers or even painting classrooms,” Kendrick says. “They just give me a call.” Kendrick and his wife, Gabrielle, chose Educare Atlanta for Abrielle when she started preschool because they really liked the benefits and because it was connected to Dunbar Elementary School. “We’ve been happy here ever since,” Kendrick says. “We’re in good hands.”

## EARLY RESULTS FOR DUNBAR CHILDREN

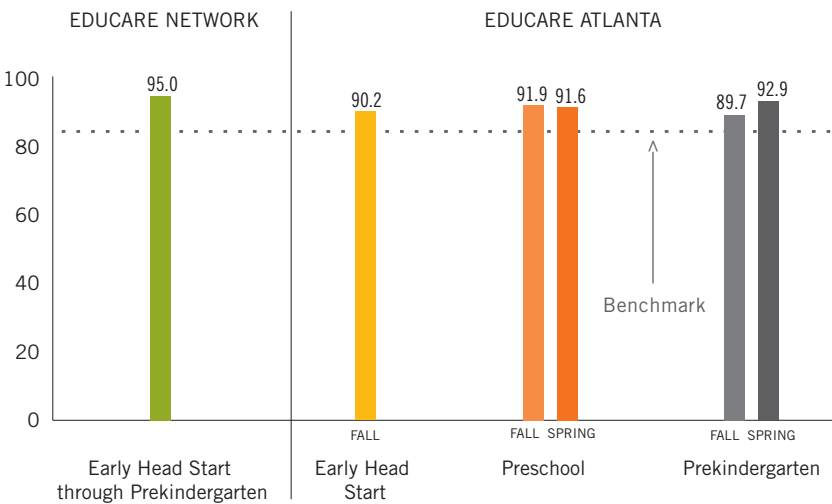
THE URBAN CHILD STUDY CENTER at Georgia State University has been studying Educare Atlanta's early childhood education program and children's progress after they transition from the early learning center into Dunbar Elementary School.

A majority of students who attended both Educare Atlanta and Dunbar Elementary School performed at or above standard benchmarks on vocabulary, reading and math measures in kindergarten through third grade.

### Early Learning

In order to examine children's development while in Educare, the evaluators compared Educare Atlanta's child outcomes with national norms and, in some cases, with those from the national Educare Learning Network. The results were mixed. In some instances when comparative data were available, outcomes observed at Educare Atlanta were below those reported for the national Educare Learning Network.<sup>7</sup> The chart below, for example, compares Educare Atlanta children's scores in picture vocabulary to those of students in the broader Educare network.

**PEABODY PICTURE VOCABULARY TEST:**  
Fourth Edition



Mean standard test scores on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, 4th Edition, by classroom.<sup>8</sup>



## Elementary Education

The evaluators are also tracking students who attended Educare Atlanta and went on to Dunbar Elementary School. A majority of students who attended both Educare Atlanta and Dunbar Elementary School performed at or above standard benchmarks on vocabulary, reading and math measures in kindergarten through third grade. As demonstrated in the charts on page 14, however, the results for those children as they progressed through school were not always better than those of Dunbar students who did not attend Educare Atlanta.<sup>9</sup>

While many of these results are promising, with children showing good vocabulary and reading skills when they enter kindergarten, the gains are not being maintained throughout elementary school. Helping students maintain their academic success will require a concerted effort, including clearer alignment between Educare and Dunbar, additional support for children once they reach elementary school and continued, intensive family involvement for elementary school parents.

## State Policy Reform

In addition to job-readiness and job-placement programs, the Casey Foundation is supporting policy reform efforts at the local and state levels to help Atlanta parents and children succeed together.

One focus is to remove systemic obstacles to employment and ensure parents returning from incarceration can access public programs such as food assistance, regain their financial footing and support their children.

Partners including the Georgia Justice Project have made important strides minimizing the effects of a criminal record. Because of their efforts, Georgia became the first state in the South to enact a ban-the-box policy for prospective state employees, preventing state agencies from screening out applicants with criminal records. The Georgia Justice Project also has been instrumental in the historic removal of the state's permanent lifetime ban on food stamps for individuals with a drug-related felony.

Casey also supports the Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students (GEEARS), a partnership working to expand high-quality early learning and promote the healthy development of the state's youngest children. GEEARS was instrumental in establishing Quality Rated, a rating and improvement system for child care providers, administered by the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning.

## OTHER INDICATORS SHOW PROMISE

79%

*of Educare Atlanta's prekindergarten students performed at or above average on a school readiness assessment (Bracken School Readiness Assessment, 3rd Edition, BRSA-3).*

76%

*of Educare Atlanta's preschool students and 82 percent of prekindergarten students performed at or above average on a reading readiness screener (Get Ready to Read!-Revised, GRTR!-R).*

94%

*of Educare Atlanta's prekindergarten students performed at or above average on a mathematical reasoning measure (Woodcock-Johnson, 3rd Edition Applied Problems subtest).*

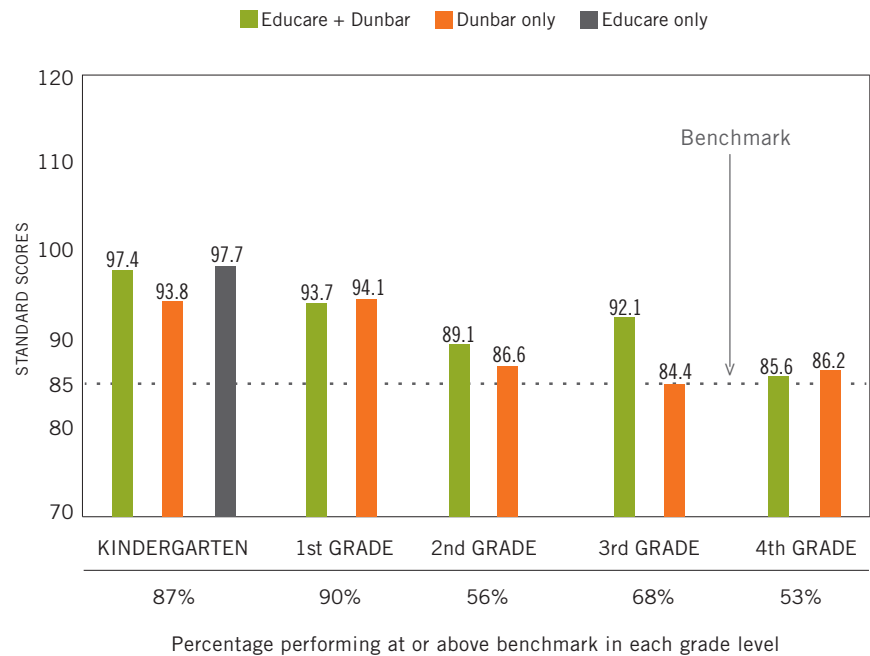
*Teachers reported that*

96%

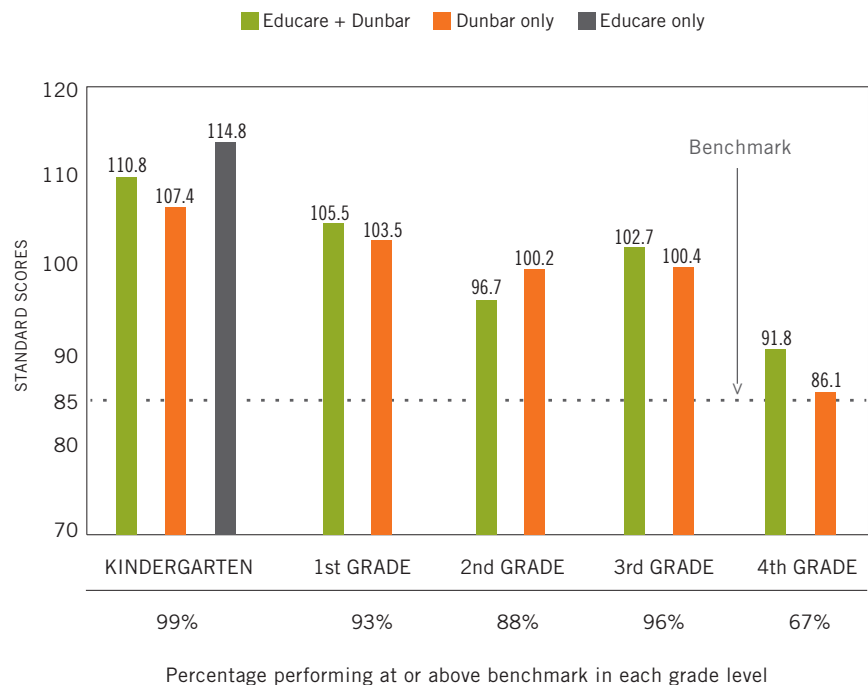
*of Educare Atlanta's prekindergarten students demonstrated age-appropriate social-emotional skills that support positive behavior, achievement and learning, like initiative taking, relationship building and self-regulation.*

Helping students maintain their academic success will require greater alignment at every step of the journey, from the early child care setting to elementary school and beyond.

### PEABODY PICTURE VOCABULARY TEST: Receptive Vocabulary, Fourth Edition



### WOODCOCK-JOHNSON LETTER-WORD IDENTIFICATION: Basic Reading, Third Edition



## LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Dunbar Learning Complex provides a comprehensive set of services to both children and adults — a model that is receiving wide attention from nonprofits, foundations and policymakers, and that is starting to be replicated across Georgia. For example, facets of the Healthy Beginnings System of Care approach have now been introduced in two additional locations in Atlanta, giving more children and families access to services, while Sheltering Arms is incorporating two-generation services for children and parents at all of its 16 locations. Recognizing the value of positioning high-quality early learning and elementary education facilities close to one another, Sheltering Arms and several partners are also constructing a new early learning center adjacent to the Barack and Michelle Obama Elementary School — formerly D.H. Stanton Elementary, which was slated for closure but will remain open as a result of residents’ advocacy efforts — in Atlanta’s Peopletown neighborhood. More than 150 children will be served. These expansions reflect both support for the critical role quality early learning plays and the growing acceptance that addressing the needs of parents also generates benefits for children.

### Developing a Two-Generation Approach

Developing this kind of comprehensive, two-generation model requires strong relationships, intentional coordination and flexibility from all partners. Each organization has its own way of working and its own set of standards, but to truly help children and parents succeed, they must develop a common mission and align services to meet that shared set of goals.

This is especially true for the educational components. Helping students maintain their academic success will require greater alignment at every step of the journey, from the early child care setting to elementary school and beyond.



“It’s not easy to bring two organizations together with two different missions to serve a family in totality. As an organization focused on workforce issues, we had to shift our thinking and place greater emphasis on the children as well.”

— *Che Watkins, president and CEO, the Center for Working Families Inc.*





Partners must be intentional about encouraging parent engagement — it will not happen on its own, and sustaining these relationships takes time.

Key partners from the Dunbar Learning Complex offered the following recommendations to help with this process and ensure greater cohesion among all involved.

- All organizations and partners must have strong leaders who are committed to the project. Engaged leaders have a better sense of the time and resources required to accomplish the mission and can mobilize their teams to push through challenges that arise.

*“Leadership on all levels across all of the partner organizations is critical and has made a difference in this project.” — Blythe Robinson, president and CEO, Sheltering Arms*

- Holding regular meetings and creating the time and space for open, honest communication across cooperating organizations is vital to developing effective partnerships.

*“It takes time to recognize that we’re in this together. It’s harder than it seems and takes longer than you’d expect to build the relationships and develop the goodwill needed to make it work.” — Susan Bertonaschi, director of Health Promotion and Healthy Beginnings, United Way of Greater Atlanta*

- Organizations must be willing to shift the way they work and make sacrifices in some cases, including time and resources.

*“To be a complete and genuine collaboration, some exceptions are going to have to be made on both sides.” — Karen Brown-Collier, principal, Dunbar Elementary School*

- It is important to constantly evaluate your progress and readjust as needed.

*“It’s a journey. You’re inventing something, so there’s no blueprint. You have to be committed to it. You live and learn and improve.” — Steve White, former director of Educare Atlanta, Sheltering Arms Early Education and Family Centers*

## Engaging Parents

- It's important to create a safe, warm and welcoming environment for parents and the broader community.
- Partners must be intentional about encouraging parent engagement — it will not happen on its own, and sustaining these relationships takes time. Engagement must be ongoing and predictable, and parents must be given opportunities to plan activities and offer feedback.
- Turnover at the learning center affects parents who build relationships with members of the staff. Leaders should anticipate these effects and take steps to mitigate them by keeping parents well informed and quickly providing the opportunity to develop relationships with new staffers.

## Providing Health Services

- A learning center-based health navigator who connects families with community resources is a viable alternative to more intensive school-based health centers. Because parents visit the center every day, a trusted professional has ample opportunity to offer education and support in a familiar environment.
- The health navigator must build relationships with staff and parents — even before the program is launched. It is important to help the community understand the need for the program and develop trust in the team.
- Providing health education in a group setting allows parents to be more engaged in the sessions and helps them build important social networks.
- Consistent communication with parents about the health component and what the program provides boosts participation and builds trust.

“It’s a journey. You’re inventing something, so there’s no blueprint. You have to be committed to it. You live and learn and improve.”

— *Steve White,*  
*former director of Educare*  
*Atlanta, Sheltering Arms*  
*Early Education and*  
*Family Centers*

## Conclusion

THE DUNBAR LEARNING COMPLEX'S two-generation approach continues to demonstrate promise for low-income families in southwest Atlanta. Through continued collaboration, strong public-private partnerships, broad co-investment and meaningful community engagement, stakeholders aim to refine and build upon this comprehensive approach to ensure success for children from birth through fifth grade and their parents.







## Endnotes

- 1 The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2012, January). *Climbing the ladder of reading proficiency: The first two years of Atlanta's Dunbar Learning Complex*. Baltimore, MD: Author. Retrieved from [www.aecf.org/resources/atlanta-civic-site](http://www.aecf.org/resources/atlanta-civic-site)
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## ABOUT THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private philanthropy that creates a brighter future for the nation's children by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow. For more information, visit the Foundation's website at [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org).

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THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

