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Gladstone alliance for kids overcomes slim budget

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Randy L. Rasmussen/The Oregonian

Kim Bugni plays with her 6-month-old grandson, Boston Bugni, in the new outdoor play area of the Gladstone Center for Children and Families. The early childhood center hosts a community playgroup for Healthy Start and other families.

GLADSTONE -- In a dismal year for school funding, Gladstone educators and nonprofits are celebrating.

A rare collaboration of social service agencies, the Gladstone School District, county government and **Clackamas Community College** produced a "birth to five" center that promotes a healthy start for hundreds of young children.

The Gladstone Center for Children and Families, with its tall ceilings and welcoming vibe, is a one-stop facility for prenatal education, preschool and kindergarten in a district where half of grade-schoolers qualify for free and reduced lunch. The center, which opened earlier this year, also houses space for county human and mental health services and soon could hold a public health clinic with a pediatric focus.

"In our state and in our nation, we spend a lot of money on early childhood, and it's all disconnected," Gladstone Superintendent Bob Stewart said. "You've got a program over here, a program over there. Shouldn't we know what (these agencies) do, know how it fits with what we do?"

Dr. David Willis, president of the Oregon Pediatric Society, said he hopes to partner with the center, which he calls "astounding."



Randy L. Rasmussen/The Oregonian

Tori Couzens, 2 1/2, of West Linn waits patiently as a volunteer treats her teeth with fluoride during a free dental hygiene program at the Gladstone Center for Children and Families. Tori's mother, who attended Gladstone School District, says her family hopes to move to Gladstone soon.

"It's a very exciting community-based effort that's being built from the ground up," Willis said. "From my standpoint, the integration of children's health into this project could be a national model."

The benefits to families may be immeasurable . The district's net cost for running the full-service center this year: \$26,500.

The initial investment was higher.

The district bought the old Danielsons grocery store in 2007 after the family agreed to donate \$800,000 to the center, making the district's purchase price \$1 million.

For the site to work, the district needed more partners. The center costs \$500,000 a year to run, but thanks to operating agreements, only \$150,000 comes from the district's general fund, says John Kinden, director of finance and operations.

The district saved further money by moving its kindergarten to the center and shifting its fifth-graders back to elementary school. Factoring in lease revenue and other shared operational expenses -- Head Start pays for the cook; Clackamas County Education Service District pitches in for janitorial -- the center adds just \$26,500 to the district's budget, Stewart said.

Finding the money was key, but more important was building the partnerships, Stewart said. That was the hard part. Gone would be the separate silos of K-12 education and early childhood agencies. The partners meet regularly to discuss issues and promise to represent the center overall, not just their service.

"In many ways, that's how they bought their way in," Stewart says. "They bought their way in by believing in the overall philosophy."

Some may question a public school district getting into the pre-K world, but center Director Mike Buchanan calls it smart strategy.

Rather than wait for problems to build and tackle them in kindergarten or later with remedial services, "We've chosen to put that money into the front end," he says. "We are truly better than any of our seven parts were separately."

Recently, a child with dental sores so painful she couldn't focus got free transportation to the dentist. No one with the school district knew the child qualified for the free service, but DHS did. It's just one example of the center's promise, Buchanan said.

Sue Elder, executive director of the Clackamas County Children's Commission, which runs Head Start, sees more interest in concentrating on the early years for academic and social success. Since the Gladstone center opened in January, more districts are talking to her about co-locating or other collaboration. Head Start expects to move into the soon-to-be closed Wichita Elementary School building in the North Clackamas School District.

Portland nonprofit Children's Institute toured the Gladstone site recently with visitors from a Chicago nonprofit on early childhood development.

"It's awfully exciting," institute spokesman Wade Fickler said. He said he didn't know of other centers where the programs were so integrated.

"It just clicked," Elder said of the way everyone came together.

Initially, the district considered an array of possibilities for the old store.

Could it be a high-tech wing for the high school? Should it be a K-1 school to relieve overcrowding? What about an early childhood center?

As Stewart pondered the ideas, he asked to attend a meeting of early childhood education groups in Clackamas County.

"I was a fish out of water," he recalls. "I didn't know what they were talking about. I didn't know these people in the room. There wasn't another person from schools there."

That, he thought, had to change.

Over his career, Stewart has learned of the struggles of his families -- parents who didn't know what to do about a child's fever or how to access benefits through the Oregon Health Plan, parents who were kids themselves and didn't know how to parent at all.

"There's no instruction manual that comes with being a parent," he said. "All young parents rely on the knowledge and experience of others to show them a way."

The center strives to be that resource. Even in an uncertain economy, Elder and other partners say they are committed to the center.

On a recent Monday, babies played in one of three outdoor sandboxes as toddlers clambered over new playground equipment. Kindergartners practiced their lessons inside floor-to-ceiling glass walls. Children got free dental fluoride in a gleaming new gym through the county's Healthy Start program.

Gladstone mom April Shapley couldn't wait for the center to open. With an 18-month-old son, 4-year-old twins and a daughter due to give birth in June, she looks forward to the Monday play group sponsored by Healthy Start.

"It gives (the twins) something to look forward to," she says.

The center continues to expand. The Clackamas County Relief Nursery has raised more than half a million dollars in grants to renovate the space next to the center. Stewart has begun talks with medical providers and the county health division to build some combination of a public health clinic, pediatric health office and school-based health center.

The county may open a Women, Infants and Children office in the center, though Stewart cautions that idea is preliminary.

In the future, the center likely will rely on grants and more partnerships to develop, Stewart said.

Putting together these essential, basic needs for young families not only makes Gladstone stand out, but should benefit families for decades, he said.

"The goal is that long after Bob Stewart leaves Gladstone School District, the center is still functioning as one facility operating as one program, not 7, 8, 9, 10 different agencies sharing a roof," he said. "Even in our darkest hours, we've got to look for opportunities ... to make schools better, make programs better, make it better for families."

About the center

The Gladstone Center for Children and Families, a comprehensive early childhood facility, offers classes for more than 230 children, including Gladstone kindergartners, low-income preschoolers and parents with infants.

• **Partners:** Gladstone School District; Clackamas Education Service District; Clackamas County Children's Commission, which runs Head Start; Healthy Start; Clackamas County Department of Human Services; Clackamas County Mental Health; **Clackamas Community College**.

• **Online:** www.gladstone.k12.or.us/GCCF.html

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