

Advanced Planning Opportunity: Expanding Irene Wortham Center's Early Learning Center

Irene Wortham Center's Early Learning Center is one of two developmental day programs in Buncombe County serving children at or below the poverty line and/or with intellectual developmental disabilities. Strong teacher to student ratios, an emphasis on social emotional development, involvement of behavioral therapists and psychologists, as well as parent and teacher training programs are key contributors to the on-going success of the Early Learning Center's developmental program. The center offers fundamental learning and growth opportunities to 100 disadvantaged children ages 6 weeks to five years old – a mission that aligns with Buncombe County's strategic priority to ensure every child has an equal opportunity to thrive in their first 2,000 days, including access to quality early childhood education.

According to the Buncombe Partnership for Children, the majority of brain development occurs in the first 2,000 days, creating the foundation for all future learning. The waitlist of more than 400 children hoping to enroll in the Early Learning Center program speaks to the need for more access to these programs in Buncombe County, especially for children with special learning needs and families requiring financial assistance. For more than 57 years, the Early Learning Center has helped children with developmental delays and socioeconomic challenges graduate and enter Kindergarten ready to learn with their peers. The emphasis on inclusive classrooms, where atypical learners work side by side with typically developing children, is fundamental to early childhood development and the understanding that people learn and communicate differently. Irene Wortham Center offers an environment that not only welcomes these differences, but highlights and builds upon them through individualized development plans, thereby creating equitable early learning opportunities and fostering strong foundations for success throughout life.

Expansion of the well-established and successful Early Learning Center is an indisputable need for the Buncombe County community, as evidenced by the center's current waitlist. Poverty-stricken children, many of whom have special learning needs, are missing out on fundamental years of learning and social emotional development due to a lack of capacity. Families realize the center's high caliber educational program and track record of success, but because there is only one other developmental day program catering to these specific populations, the waitlist continues to grow and children's early learning needs are continuously neglected.

The current building, which opened in 1970 and still reflects mostly original features and design aspects, does not serve the children to the best of its ability. For children with developmental delays, the classroom is essentially another "teacher" and therefore the design of the classroom environment must be carefully considered. The room arrangement is critical to fostering an appropriate learning environment; placement of doorways, windows, toilets, sinks, changing tables, and stationary furniture must be in such a way that enables teachers to meet the needs of all the children. For instance, a bathroom with sinks at a 3 year-old's height will support that child's development with independence and learning about self-care. All architectural elements of a new Early Learning Center building will ensure classroom design and positioning of equipment is accessible for children using walkers and wheelchairs. Throughout the process of designing a new building, the new requirements within The Division of Child Development and Sanitation will guide classroom arrangements to enhance supervision and safety for every child and teacher.

Buncombe County families would greatly benefit from the Early Learning Center increasing its capacity and offering more children access to specialized fundamental early learning opportunities. Irene Wortham Center has recognized this growing community need and prioritized the expansion project as a goal to complete over the next five years. Support for the Advanced Planning costs, per the proposal from Novus, will help the non-profit kick-start the building project and successfully launch a focused capital campaign.

Source:

<https://www.buncombecounty.org/common/commissioners/strategic-priorities/Early-Childhood-Education.pdf>

<https://www.buncombecounty.org/common/Commissioners/20181030/Reso-Early%20Childhood%20Education%20%26%20Development%20Fund-revised.pdf>

<https://buildthefoundation.org/2018/11/buncombe-county-establishes-early-childhood-fund/>

<https://buncombepfc.org/about-us/get-involved/2000-days/>