



WE SET THESE CHILDREN FOR LIFE, and we work together as a TIGHT COMMUNITY to do that.”

—Jean-Louis Kong, teacher,  
Donald Stewart Center for Early Childhood Education

# GREAT BEGINNINGS & EARLY AWARENESS

To the little ones who pass through the giant doors daily, Oklahoma’s **Muskogee Early Childhood Center** (grade PK) and New Jersey’s **Donald Stewart Center for Early Childhood Education, School 51** (grade PK) in Elizabeth are Magic Kingdoms. Both centers, recognized as 2016 National Schools of Character, invite pre-kindergartners, many of whom are minority children living in poverty, to experience their first taste of joyful learning.

The irony is that both schools, which lie more than 1300 miles apart, are not fairyland castles but very “well-designed” state-

of-the-art schools in which everything—the environment, the physical layout, the principal, the staff, the parents AND the children—work together to provide an exciting introduction to learning. An observer might say that, although the accents you hear are decidedly different, the two schools are mirror images of each other, “You can always tell the difference between the students who began kindergarten transferring from **Muskogee Early Childhood Center** (MECC) and those who came from the home or daycare. Students from MECC are already recognizing letters and words, while others are brand new to those concepts,” says Kim Fleak, principal of Muskogee’s Irving Elementary.

A strong accent on learning, leadership and personal and group responsibility set these Pre-K 2016 National Schools of Character apart:

- Oklahoma’s **Muskogee Early Childhood Center** (grade PK) in Muskogee
- New Jersey’s **Donald Stewart Center for Early Childhood Education, School 51** (grade PK) in Elizabeth
- **Don Earl Early Childhood Center** (grade PK) in the Fox C-6 District in Arnold, MO
- **John Cary Early Childhood Center** (grade PK-K) in the Mehlville School District, MO
- **Lincoln Elementary School** (grades PK-3) in Clay Center, KS
- **Norwood Elementary School** (grades PK-3) in Dundalk, MD



Likewise, in New Jersey, Nicole Yulling, a teacher for four-year-olds at School 51, says, “We have very high expectations here, and we train the children for social competence. We give them the tools to succeed academically and socially. By the time they leave us, they are much better off at managing their feelings and handling conflicts as well as being set academically for kindergarten.”

Gone are the days when pre-school meant singing songs, tumbling together and taking naps. A strong accent on learning, leadership and personal and group responsibility occur not only at the Oklahoma and New Jersey pre-schools but also at the two Missouri childhood centers that are hailed as 2016 National Schools of Character: **Don Earl Early Childhood Center** and the **John Cary Early Childhood Center**. Carolyn Sproull, special education teacher at Don Earl, which, like John Cary, has a large percentage of youngsters with special needs, praises this approach because it emphasizes “what children can do instead of what children cannot do.” Two primary schools also recognized as 2016 National Schools of Character, **Lincoln Elementary School and the Norwood Elementary School**, maintain strong pre-kindergarten programs with the dual emphasis on academics and character building.

### **Caring and Sharing**

“We lay the foundation that often determines where they will go in life,” says Amanda Le Fever, teacher at School 51 which, like the other five schools, recognizes the crucial importance of creating a climate of caring. From the outset, the theme, “Friends Care, Friends Share” is at the forefront at School 51. Juliette Smith, who teaches the four-year-olds, points out how the children use the Resolution Box to settle conflicts among themselves and “call for the teacher only if they reach an impasse.” Simple strategies become second nature to the children: Use good deeds and good manners; Use your words, not your hands; Take a deep breath; Express how you feel; Help someone in need.

Chats with the little ones show that they understand the core values as they readily give tangible examples. Giselle, in the four-year-old class at School 51, says, “We all take turns in the sandbox.” Sara, in the same grade, says, “We always share our toys.” Simosola, also in the same grade, says, “When we’re cooking, we work together. We follow directions, and we don’t fight.” At MECC the four-year-olds are also remarkably mature in explaining the Word of the Month. Gregory speaks with the élan of a college professor: “This month, we are working on being reflective—which means we think often about what we can do to be better today than we were yesterday.” Over in Missouri, the four-year-olds at Don Earl are also having a conversation about their Word of the Month—integrity. They define it as “playing by the rules,” so talk revolves around playing fair, observing rules and what constitutes good sportsmanship. Karen Morris, a teacher at John Cary, notes, “Teaching character is

embedded in everything we do... This is where character starts and sets the foundation for future success. Learning to share, problem-solving and caring for others occur naturally in our environment and have always been a priority in our classrooms.” Cary’s little ones, the Caring Cardinals, try hard to follow the tenets of the Take Care Code: “Strive to take care of ourselves, take care of each other, take care of our school/home, take care of our world.” Parent Laurie Tretter-Larkin remarks, “Everyone understands the Take Care Code, and this bridges home and school.”

Taking care of oneself and others is also paramount at Lincoln, which uses the Seven Habits of Happy Kids as a guide to living and learning. Leadership begins in the early grades as all students get a chance to assume an important duty such as problem solver, caboose, door holder, teacher leader or trash patrol. The children excitedly explain their roles. Clairra, a kindergartner, says, “I’m the caboose, and that means I keep people in line and quiet.” Rylan, another kindergartner,

adds, “I’m a problem solver. I help fix computers.” Rhonda Richter, Lincoln kindergarten teacher, observes: “I see independence as opposed to dependence in students. If I am busy with another student, the student designated as the problem solver goes to help. The student leadership roles help. Students see something, and they just do it.”

A culture of caring also characterizes Norwood Elementary School

because the school embeds restorative practices, virtues and problem-solving into every aspect of school life. Kendra Powell, the school counselor, says that character-building “has transformed the school” and that “the kids have taken ownership.” With the restorative practices model, the virtues are at the center of classroom routines, and, whenever a conflict arises, students know how to problem-solve in small group “justice circles.” Parent Laura Frasca observes that this focus on character has promoted true caring: “They’re looking for the good in their fellow students.”

### **A Gateway to a Successful Life**

“Many of the children face enormous challenges such as high poverty, language barriers and special needs. Therefore, we make every effort to recognize early learning lags and to work with parents to address them,” says Jocelyn Rodriguez, the industrious principal of School 51, which is a dual language pre-school with instruction given in English and Spanish in alternate weeks. School 51 parents are quick to point out how the school identified student weaknesses, rectified them and set their children on the path of lifelong learning. Parent Loretta Stevens recalls some time ago when her son had difficulty with alphabet recognition. Both his teacher and the principal gave her helpful materials, and “by the next benchmark, he was in the top percentile in everything.” Agustina Appiah, who hails from Ghana, is tearful as she tells how her son “now reads better” than his mother and was accepted into a

“We think often  
about what we can do to  
be better today  
than we were yesterday.”

—Gregory, four-year-old student, MECC

gifted and talented program. When she had trouble understanding the application, one of his teachers filled it out for her.

Parents from the other pre-schools join in the praise of the perceptive teachers who made a major difference in a child's life. When parent Tim King is asked what he likes best about MECC, he points out that "the staff genuinely and meaningfully cares about the children and their education." The other pre-schools have also produced miraculous changes. Danielle Singleton, who is a mother of two sons enrolled at Don Earl, where 77 percent of its student body experience a broad range of special needs, says, "I love this school. I feel respected by teachers and administration as do my children, I feel welcome, and I wouldn't change a thing. My son came into the program with an IEP, and he is leaving with services being dropped, and he has been tested as 'gifted.'"

Dragica Dizdarevic, the bilingual specialist for the Mehlville School District, praises the work of John Cary in helping the Bosnian families adjust to a new school and a new nation. She is grateful for the way this school is "helping people from other countries" and "especially the children with disabilities." Again and again, the words teamwork and communication pop up as parents and staff reflect on qualities that have made their schools successful. Rita Hansen, a custodian at John Cary, shows that indeed it is a finely tuned group effort that results in what seems a seamless process: "Everyone has a role, such as mentoring students, and works together to make sure that our school is safe, friendly and a happy environment. Even our therapy dog brings smiles to the kids as the parents bring her treats every morning."

### Strengthening the Foundation

If the pre-schools plant the seeds for a successful life, the early elementary grades play pivotal roles in nurturing rich growth. Both Lincoln Elementary and the Norwood STEM Program provide excellent examples of ways to enkindle the love of learning and spark the imagination while developing character. A visit to the classrooms of these schools is inspiring.

Academic success is a high priority at Lincoln, but so is excitement in learning. Lincoln's principal, Matt Weller, says the school goal is that "all kindergarten students are reading by the end of the school year." Hands-on activities and student demonstrations to the community highlighted each year include: an egg drop project in kindergarten; a dinosaur museum in first grade; a habitat development in second; an Ellis Island experience in third. Lincoln is also innovative in drawing on fathers and male community members for its Watch Dog volunteer program to build relationships between adults and children. Kristin Wright, the school counselor, trains all the men prior to the start of the school year on the roles that men play in their children's lives and helps them understand Lincoln's virtues and the Seven Habits of Happy Kids. Parent John Runnebaum has just one word to describe the orientation: "Amazing."

Norwood Elementary, from its very inception as a STEM school (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) in Baltimore County, offers its students engrossing opportunities. Determined to develop the whole child, Norwood is now a STREAM school by adding responsibility and art to the mix. Project-based learning, critical thinking and individual inquiry dominate in a challenging, student-centered curriculum that includes a Writer's Workshop. STEM museums in the hallways feature student inventions along with the feedback they have received from their peers. A decided favorite is the third-grade Safe Racer project in which students must design a car that keeps an egg safe. Using cotton balls, cardboard and other recycled materials, the young inventors must observe strict weight and length restrictions. The project links back to their real lives as they discuss the importance of wearing a seatbelt and observing safety precautions.

"Everyone works together to teach students how to be the best that they can be," says Norwood parent Stacey Wade, who echoes an observation heard frequently in these schools. What is interesting is how seriously the staff in all schools regard both the art and the science of teaching at such an early stage. PLCs thrive, teachers are constantly sharing ideas and "data-driven" takes on new meaning as faculty work together to find out precisely what students know, what they don't know and how to present material so all will know it. Yalily Feliciano, who teaches the 3-year-olds at School 51, sums up the warm and professional spirit of all six schools: "We feel like a family here. We get together for fun, but also for instructional ideas." ■

