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Winning with Awards

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on improving America's schools

ADVENTURES IN PHILANTHROPY

G R E A T L O C A L G R A N T S

SIX WEEKS INTO HER JOB AS PROGRAM director at Small Steps Nurturing Center, Kathie Hartzog found herself crying in the front seat of her car. That day a three-year-old child had lashed out at her with a profanity she's too embarrassed to repeat, and then he trashed her office because he was upset.

Many teachers would have walked away, and no one would have blamed Hartzog if she had. Small Steps, after all, is in the heart of Houston's inner city, notorious for poverty, broken homes, and drug dealers.

But instead of leaving, Hartzog thought about what she'd seen. It dawned on her that most of the school's children had never learned the basics of good behavior and interacting with adults. "Everything in these kids' lives is so marginal," Hartzog tells *Philanthropy*. "How could I expect a child to know how to eat at a table when his home literally had no table, or know how to talk to me when he observed his parents mistreating each other verbally and physically?"

The day proved to be an epiphany for Hartzog, and ever since she's been doing the impossible—teaching her tender children acceptable behavior and preparing them academically for the all-important elementary school years.

In 1995, a group of Christians in Houston founded Small Steps to help children aged two to five. They have chosen that age group because they believe resolving the inner city's social ills requires reaching its most vulnerable children as early as possible to prepare them for the difficult task of breaking the poverty cycle. Once the children reach kindergarten at age five they move on to new schools. The secret to success, Hartzog now knows, is addressing the children's behavioral problems first. With

Grantor:
AIM Foundation

Grantee:
Small Steps
Nurturing Center

Amount:
Low five figures

that in check, everything else follows.

To help with the behavior problems, Hartzog turned to her friend Dr. Michelle Forrester, then a psychologist with Texas Children's Hospital. Forrester used her internship experience at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles as the basis to develop a "social emotional training program" that focused on working with adults to improve their children's behavior by teaching adult caregivers to respect children as people with opinions, ideas, and rights. At the same time, her program also stresses that grownups "have to stand up to children and let them know 'I can stop you.'"

Hartzog and Forrester had previously worked together at Presbyterian School—Hartzog's employer before Small Steps—where children typically came from more affluent backgrounds. Forrester's program had worked at Presbyterian, but Forrester had never tried her approach with children from heavily disadvantaged backgrounds. Despite this, Hartzog was confident. "Michelle's beliefs

matched mine," Hartzog says, "you respect who each individual is, while setting expectations for behavior."

Forrester started with Small Steps' teachers and trained them to use positive language and to listen to reasonable requests. "If a child asks to go outside," Forrester explains, "you could say 'Sure, just as soon as you clean up,' instead of saying, 'No, not until you clean up.'"

Since teachers have begun using Forrester's positive language approach, the change in the students has been dramatic. By the end of their first year at Small Steps, Hartzog says, only a few children are still having behavioral difficulties. By the time they graduate from Small Steps, nearly every child has overcome these problems. Some children need one-on-one therapy to make it, to be sure, but in the end almost all succeed.

Empirical confirmation of Hartzog's observations is now appearing. In 2001, incoming two-year-olds were given the Mullens Scales of Early Learning Test, which assesses five critical areas of growth: receptive language, expressive language, gross motor skills, fine motor skills, and visual reception skills. As a group, these incoming two-year-olds were significantly lagging in both expressive and receptive language. In both categories, well over half the incoming students tested "at risk," with more than half of those testing as "significantly delayed." "Across the board," Forrester says, "the kids were well below average."

Officially, the clinical psychologist who administered the test described the Small Steps children as showing "a greater proportion of developmental delays than expected from a sample of same-aged children in the general population," with several children demonstrating "behavioral difficulties" that would require "fur-

ther assessment and treatment.” Informally, the hospital test administrators told Hartzog they’d “never seen a class of children who scored as poorly as your incoming two-year-olds.”

But after just one year at Small Steps, the children’s scores on the Mullens test had improved between 18 and 27 points on a 129-point scale, which was enough to pull all but one child out of the “significantly delayed” category. (See nearby chart.) Hartzog attributes this incredible success to the comprehensive nature of the Small Steps’ program which addresses the social, emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual needs of its students. In particular, the social emotional program and a literacy program developed at Rice University have been instrumental in achieving these results. The Rice University Storytelling Project promotes literacy through the words most important to children: their names and the words used in the stories they tell. Small Steps starts by helping children to recognize their own names. “By the time they’re four or five,” says Hartzog, “they’re reading each other’s names and sounding

out other words.” Teachers spend a great deal of time writing out the stories that children dictate to them. These stories are then used to create plays, write books, and most importantly, to learn to read.

The end result is that when Small Steps students move into kindergarten, they’re ready. Nationwide, 66 percent of all students entering kindergarten can recognize their letters, according to a 2001 study done by the National Center for Education Statistics. At Small Steps, approximately 90% of the children enter kindergarten knowing all the letters of the alphabet. And 80% of these Small Steps students also know the letters’ sounds, compared to only 29 percent of all students entering kindergarten. That kind of preparation for early reading instruction “can make an enormous difference,” says Louisa Moats, director of literacy research and professional development at Sopris West Educational Services.

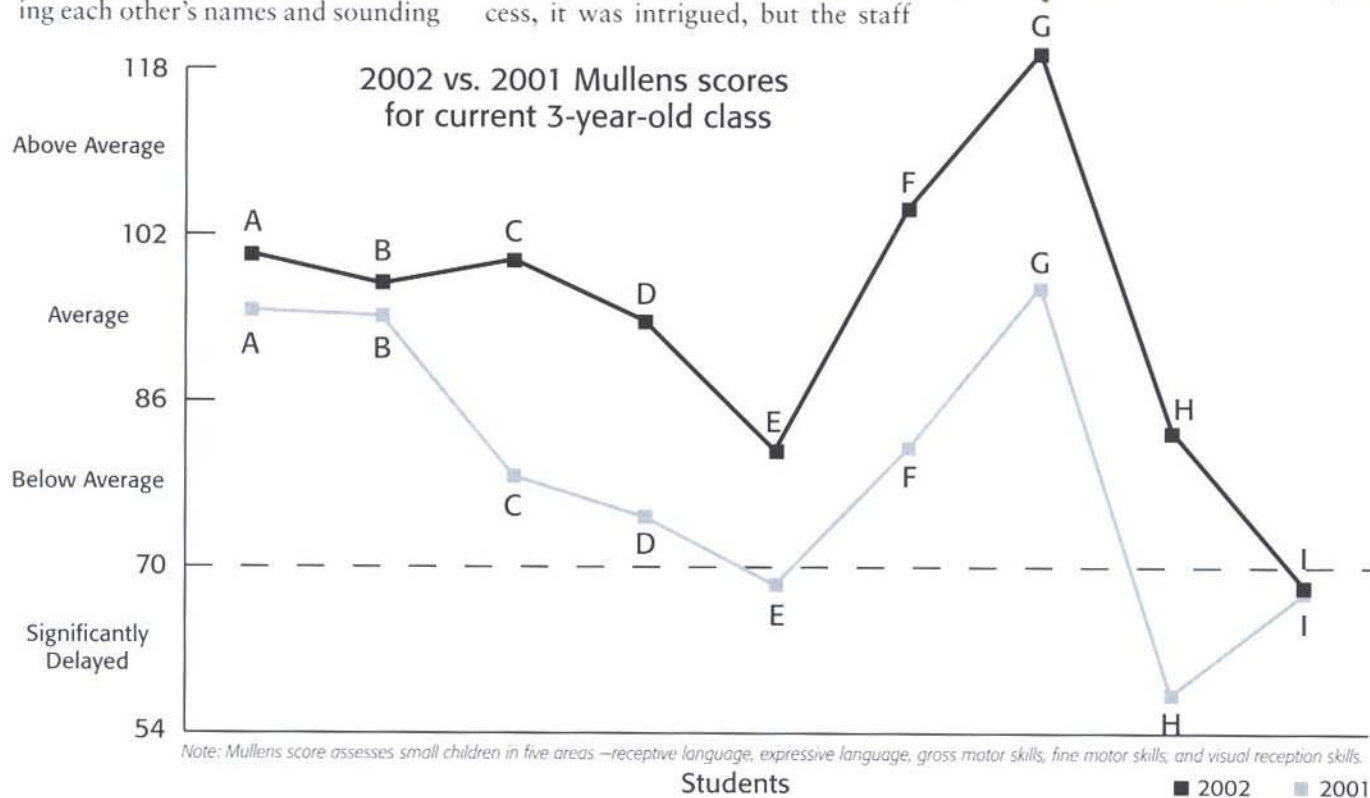
EXPLAINING SUCCESS

WHEN THE AIM FOUNDATION OF Houston learned of Small Steps’ success, it was intrigued, but the staff

insisted on investigating further. “We move cautiously before funding,” says Patricia Lewis, executive director of AIM Foundation.

Test scores can show if a school is successful, but they can’t show why. So AIM staff members made a number of unannounced visits to the school to observe day-to-day interaction between teachers and children. “Children don’t behave all the time,” AIM tells *Philanthropy*, “so you need to watch how the teachers are interacting with the children who are out of bounds.” These non-scripted moments, AIM says, tell the tale. “When you see the teacher and child interacting well in these situations, you know it isn’t staged. This is an everyday situation.” These visits, as much as the compelling test scores, convinced AIM to fund Small Steps.

AIM representatives were also impressed with the school’s organization. Small Steps keeps enrollment low by design—currently, there are only 57 students. This allows teachers to give the children the time and attention each needs to grow. The small numbers also allow the school to work actively on



Note: Mullens score assesses small children in five areas—receptive language, expressive language, gross motor skills, fine motor skills, and visual reception skills.

each child's behalf to secure the best elementary school environment for that child, whether public or private. Small Steps seeks to place its students in Houston's better public, private and charter schools, preferably on well-earned scholarships, and it has had considerable success in doing so. But Small Steps doesn't force children who aren't ready. "We're very careful about who we send to these schools," Hartzog says, "we don't want to send someone who isn't ready. And we want the schools to come back to us for more students." This is beginning to happen. Currently, at least two schools have asked Small Steps for additional students.

AIM was also impressed by both the teaching staff and how they're placed. Each class has two teachers; all lead teachers have a bachelor's degree and are working on, or have completed, graduate degrees. The assistant teachers are also committed to furthering their educations and bring exceptional teaching experience to the classroom. More important

than the teachers' qualifications, however, is the fact that they stay. "If we lose a teacher," says Small Steps executive director Jessica Brazelton, "it's usually to pregnancy."

Teacher turnover is one of the major impediments to developing and maintaining high-quality preschool programs. A 2001 study by the Center for the Child Care Workforce noted that the preschool "teaching staff workforce is alarmingly unstable." One study found a turnover rate of 86 percent among teachers at the 75 childcare centers it tracked in three California communities between 1994 and 2000.

Asked why Small Steps succeeds in retaining teachers when others can't, the people at AIM point to teacher pay. "They aren't given princely sums, but they're salaried, with benefits, and not working for an hourly wage." Dr. Forrester sees another reason. "The school never says no. If the children need something, the school will raise the funds to make it happen." Teachers receive the

resources and administrative support they need to do their job.

Small Steps is looking to expand, but cautiously. The school accepts no government funding, and the children pay no tuition; Small Steps depends entirely upon fundraising and grants. This strategy does concern the people at AIM, but "they're doing it," a foundation staffer says. Brazelton emphasizes that even in a down market, the school continues each year to top the preceding year's fundraising. "When hard choices have to be made," she says, "people understand the importance of education and are willing to support programs truly making a difference."

Hartzog still has days that make her cry. "It hurts to realize not all children will find a way out of the poverty cycle," she says, "But we have so many success stories that give me hope for the future of these children. The next mayor of Houston might be sitting in one of our classes." If he is, the citizens of Houston will be blessed.

—Martin Davis



Close attention to academic, social, and personal issues has some of Houston's most underprivileged children making giant strides at Small Steps.