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## Early ed center aims to change a community E3 school to be a showcase of early childhood practices, blending public and private efforts

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Elevate Early Education, a statewide early education advocacy group with local roots, plans to build a multimillion dollar center in Norfolk's Park Place neighborhood, officials announced last week.

The center - to be called The E3 School LLC for now - will sit near the YMCA on Granby Street and will use up to \$10 million in philanthropic support. E3 President and CEO Lisa Howard said the goal is to bolster the educational foundation of kindergarten-bound students and use the outcomes to spur greater public investment in early childhood education.

"It really will be a showroom of quality where not only early educators can come, but also where legislators and elected officials can come," Howard said. "We see this as a platform for policy change."

Roughly 26 people will be employed at the full-day, year-round school, Howard said, including about 19 "highly interactive" teachers. They'll be responsible for teaching 104 children ages 1 to 5 critical thinking, literacy, math and other skills. Howard said the nonprofit school will assess the outcomes of its "quality infusion" by tracking students through third grade.

The students will be selected from upper-, middle- and lower-income brackets, Howard said, to demonstrate that early education can make a difference in grade school performance no matter a child's socioeconomic background. Officials are still crafting the selection process.

"That will be up to the regional advisory board," Howard said, "but my guess is that there will be some sort of lottery."

The school will work closely with various public and private entities, Howard said, including the Y on Granby. Billy George, president and chief executive at the YMCA of South Hampton Roads, said while E3 focuses on the child, the Y seeks to strengthen the child's family and continue to maximize his or her "great start" after age 5.

"Bottom line is: We love it," said George about the anticipated collaboration. "Every day, for every parent that brings their child to E3, 50 feet away is an opportunity to engage the whole family."

Gary McCollum, Cox Communications Virginia senior executive, is chair of the E3 board.

"This model will prove that investment in high-quality early education programs is the best way to support improved academic outcomes in our K-12 system," McCollum said. "It will be a powerful catalyst for improving early education practice, informing policy and cultivating new public-private investments."

Construction on the two-story, 12,645-square-foot building is expected to commence next month, and officials anticipate a fall 2014 opening. The architecture firm is Norfolk-based Tymoff+Moss Architects and the general contractor is Virginia Beach-based Hourigan Construction.

E3 has a 501(c)4 division aimed at lobbying and a 501(c)3 side overseeing awareness campaigns and other projects, including The E3 School. The 501(c)3 arm recently received a state grant of \$250,000 to help launch a pilot program aimed at expanding kindergarten-readiness assessments in Virginia, but that money won't be mixed with the school's funds. Howard said The E3 School will have its "own restrictive dollars and an endowment."

Howard said construction is estimated to cost around \$3.5 million, so the other privately raised money, about \$6.5 million, will be used for the school's endowment.

Howard said the idea for The E3 School came in part from Barry Downing, a Kansas businessman and philanthropist who founded The Opportunity Project, or TOP, in Wichita. TOP is a full-day, full-year pre-school program that targets impoverished children. In a telephone interview, Downing said the program has graduated 1,000 children in 12 years of existence and has yielded great results.

"It's typical in poverty neighborhoods that only about 35 percent of the children are operating at age level when they're 3 years old," Downing said. "With one full year with this real enriched intervention we're finding that that number moves up to 85 percent."

Downing started the program after noticing that public investment for educating 4-year-olds was about \$4,000 annually. He said he figured that if that was supplemented with about \$2,000 or \$3,000 per year from the private side, "that would give the child a real high-quality education."

Howard, who reached out to Downing a few years ago, said she's aiming even higher.

"Our model is a \$10,000 per-child cost," she said, adding that she hopes the model will be replicated across Virginia.

The center has been three years in the works, Howard said. George said the Y - an \$8 million project that opened in May - was built with intentions to have an early childhood operation within or nearby. The partnership with E3 took off over the last several months, he said.

The E3 School will sit right next to the Y, sharing a 2.5-acre plot of land at 30th and Granby streets. The city of Norfolk contributed \$925,000 for the purchase of that land, city officials said.

George said the Y has a gymnasium that's empty many hours and a swimming pool where children in E3 could learn to swim.

"What an incredible opportunity to teach the families and kids involved in E3 how to adopt a healthy lifestyle at an early age," George said. "The genius is that you don't have one player trying to do everything."

The goal of The E3 School is to show legislators the importance of the investment in pre-K education, Howard said, citing studies that show 90 percent of a child's brain is developed before age 5. According to a 2010 report from Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit Voices for America's Children, state, federal and local annual educational investment in Virginia for ages 2 and under is \$400 per child. That figure is \$1,817 per child for ages 3 to 5. For school-age children, or 6- to 18-year-olds, it's \$9,814 per child.

The E3 School announcement came at a "mix and mingle" event held in honor of Smart Beginnings South Hampton Roads, an early education advocacy group that is closing its doors at the end of the month. The regional nonprofit spearheaded many initiatives, including a childcare-center rating system and early educator scholarships, all of which are now being managed by public and private partners.

SBSHR was founded in 2005 after leaders of the Hampton Roads Community Foundation noticed Hampton Roads had some of the least-prepared kindergarten students in the state. SBSHR, which was publicly and privately funded, had a local focus and intended to close after passing the torch to municipalities and other partners including Tidewater Community College.

Several SBSHR board members, including McCollum of Cox Communications, founded E3 last year.

It is privately funded with a statewide focus and its primary mandate is to push state legislators to increase or reallocate early education funding. Its pilot program, expected to be mature by 2015, is aimed at expanding Virginia's Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening, or PALS, to assess other skills besides literacy.

Data from the expanded PALS program - plus data from The E3 School's longitudinal tracking - will dictate lobbying efforts, E3 officials said.

Downing said there's no "secret sauce" for creating a successful early education center. For his part, he said, the recipe was an intense literacy-based curriculum, high-quality teachers, extended time frames, parental involvement, and health and nutrition services.

"If E3 does what we've done and does it well and provides a high-quality facility," Downing said, "I think there's no question it will change a community." nib



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