

EDCI serves education of youth

Durham organization provides children and families with services from cradle to college or career

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Education services are beginning to take effect in the 120 blocks zoned for the East Durham Children's Initiative (EDCI), an organization striving to combat the high crime rates and low standardized test scores that have come to characterize the community.

As part of the Center for Child and Family Health, EDCI aims to work with community members and partner organizations to create a variety of services for children in East Durham, starting from birth and continuing to the time they are ready for college or careers.

"We want to be the added value to education in Durham," says David Reese, director of EDCI. Reese joined the project in June 2010, previously serving as the chief operating officer for food recovery and distribution at the Inter-Faith Food Shuttle in Raleigh.

Education providers met in 2008 to begin planning EDCI. Though this is the first year of full implementation, Reese places importance on the planning process.

"We will always be in the planning mode because the community changes and the needs of children change," he says.

With seven full-time employees, four contractors, numerous interns and volunteers, and the support of various community organizations in Durham, EDCI is now serving the 160 families and 330 children registered in its programs.

These families are eligible to access the 20 partner organizations of EDCI and the interventions within the EDCI pipeline because their children are in kindergarten, first grade or second grade within the EDCI zoning area. With each successive grade, more children will be added to the program, and children currently enrolled will be supported throughout elementary, middle and high school.

"We believe that the child is at the center of what we do and that cer-



Photo by: Jagir Patel

Members of the EDCI staff represent a diverse range of professionals, from former teachers and educators to those with nonprofit experience. (L-R: Cate Elander, Rachel Mills, Mary Mathew, Amber Wade, Carla Marlin, David Reese).

tain environmental factors impact the child," says Reese. EDCI focuses on high quality, evidence-based intervention services to reduce the obstacles a child faces in his or her environment.

"Parents are one of the most important of these environmental factors," says Carla Marlin, one of EDCI's parent advocates. As part of EDCI's staff, parent advocates serve as the main mechanism by which EDCI can engage its target population.

"One of the first things we say to parents is 'I work for you,'" says Marlin. "We give moral support to parents." Marlin says that her experience as a mother and educator have made her realize the importance of parental engagement in a child's education.

Rachel Mills, the bilingual parent advocate for EDCI, recounts a story in which her advocacy on behalf of a parent led to a better understanding of the child's needs. "Both the parent and teacher made a connection that probably would not have been made if we hadn't been there as advocates," says Mills.

Marlin and Mills help parents understand what questions they can ask and what services their child should receive.

"We also help parents address obstacles to their child's education outside of school," says Cate Elander, a former

EDCI parent advocate who now serves as the organization's outreach coordinator. Elander describes services such as helping parents get their electricity back on as an example of what EDCI does in its assets-based approach.

"Parents really want to be great people, and we need to give them tools to do so," says Marlin. Parent advocates have become a cornerstone to EDCI because they allow one-on-one interaction between EDCI and the parent. Advocates meet with parents at home, go to school to check on the kids and work together with teachers and administrators to form strong relationships with every support system the child has.

These relationships build community and have an impact—an impact that will be studied by Duke University's Center for Child and Family Policy. "We want to know if this is working, and evaluating ourselves is part of the process," says Reese.

EDCI has begun to garner more and more attention, leaving its staff members with a vision for EDCI's future. Amber Wade, EDCI's project administrator, hopes to bring out the goodness that is already in Durham.

"East Durham is a place of really good people," Wade says. "We want to empower them with a voice."