

Bilingual preschool aims to break down financial barriers in childhood education

By Katie Reeder

UNC Special Projects Editor

Steven Blalock knows the value of early childhood education, and he wants to make sure his 4-year-old son, Ja-Mar, is ready for kindergarten.

"I just want him to be able to get the fundamentals, and what he'll learn he'll take with him," Blalock said.

With the opening of bilingual preschool program EDCI LEAP Academy, Ja-Mar is getting the chance to learn Spanish, make crafts and interact with other children his age.

A joint effort of East Durham Children's Initiative and the Latino Educational Achievement Partnership (LEAP), the preschool opened its doors Feb. 2.

David Reese, CEO and president of EDCI, touted the program's design to serve students from both English- and Spanish-speaking homes as well as its 6-to-1 student-teacher ratio.

"The goal for us, I think, is very, very straightforward in that we need to have children and families who are kindergarten-ready, because that is the beginning of academic success for children," Reese said.

Blalock was complimentary of the teachers and said he was impressed with the amount of individual attention students receive.

The program was the next logical step in serving the children and families of the EDCI zone, according to Reese. He said 62 percent of the families in the area have no access to high-quality child care.

"This is part of the process of us getting to walk with children as well as part of...this community-based effort to deliver children who live in the zone to elementary school, to kindergarten in particular, who are ready to learn," Reese said.

The only requirement for children to attend EDCI LEAP Academy is that they live in the EDCI zone, Reese said. He said no child will be denied from the program because of an inability to afford it.

There is a \$25-per-month fee parents are asked to pay, but if they cannot afford that, Reese said parents can pay what they are able to. He said the program was designed in a way that would



Ja-Mar Blalock, 4, proudly shows off a craft he made at EDCI LEAP Academy. "I built it all myself," he said. (Staff photo by Katie Reeder)

allow parents to participate financially, at least on some level, in their children's education.

"For us, this is about alleviating barriers, making sure we're not creating any other barriers," Reese said.

Aside from the parents' contributions, donors fund the preschool, Reese said. He said there is no city-based funding for the program but that it has enough support to be sustainable in the long run.

The preschool is housed in the East Durham Recreational Center at 2615 Harvard Ave. and is operated by the Durham Parks and Recreation Department. EDCI gained access to the building through a bidding process, said EDCI community ambassador Clifton Daye.

Daye has been working to make sure

the building is safe and secure for students and teachers. He said the building was chosen for its location in East Durham and that he thinks it is in a relatively safe area.

"I just want to make sure every child arrives safe and leaves safe," Daye said.

The building was already equipped with an alarm system, and the doors remain locked during operating hours. Televisions were also installed to secure the perimeter of the building, Daye said.

There will be a launch party to celebrate the preschool's opening on Feb. 26 from noon to 1 p.m. at the East Durham Recreation Center on Harvard Avenue. Speakers will include Reese, Mayor Bill Bell and LEAP's executive director, Leigh Bordley.