

Partnership with Head Start program a win-win

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Story by JEANNINE SATO, Durham Connects director

Miss Mollie's School of Grace in Grace Lutheran Church is a noisy, busy place.

Each weekday morning it is filled with preschoolers playing, singing and reading. Miss Mollie's is a half-day preschool program so most kids go home before lunch.

Until recently the preschool rooms sat dark and quiet in the afternoons and evenings. That was before Miss Mollie's teamed up with Durham's Early Head Start (DEHS) Home-Based Program to offer a child-friendly place to hold its playgroups.

The Durham Early Head Start Home-Based Program is a federally funded program that is overseen by Durham's Partnership for Children and run out of Healthy Families Durham at the Center for Child and Family Health NC. The home-based program assists parents with their child's early learning by bringing early childhood development workers right into the home.

Today it serves more than 55 children and their families. DEHS Home-Based Coordinator, Elisabeth Hargrove, said: "It's a place for parents to feel proud of their child's success and the success of the family. It's an investment in their child's education. It's like preschool in their home, using the evidence-based PAT (Parents as Teachers) curriculum."

The Durham Early Head Start home visitors, four of whom are bilingual in English/Spanish, spend an hour and a half with the families each week. But the home visitors say they are not the teachers, the parents are. "The Early Head Start Home-Based workers are like teacher's assistants. They provide a framework for the curriculum and play-based activities, but it's the parents, as teachers, that show their children that learning is fun," continued Hargrove.

Miss Mollie's saw the chance to partner with DEHS Home-Based as a win-win situation. "We had been looking for ways to outreach to our neighborhood community," said Miss Mollie's director, Jean Sam. "For me it was serendipitous ... here they came. The population was diverse and it seemed like the perfect way to connect up. They have brought so much to us culturally."

It works like this: The DEHS Home-Based Program gives a small donation to the church for use of its preschool space for playgroups. Grace Lutheran Church decided to use the monthly stipend from DEHS to provide scholarships for two DEHS Home-Based children to attend the morning preschool. Church members have also pitched in to offer a third scholarship to another Durham Early Head Start Home-Based family.

DEHS Home-Based services are available in English and Spanish. Sam says the diversity the DEHS kids bring to the school is invaluable. Likewise, DEHS Home-Based knows that the preschool program will give these kids a leg-up when it is time for them to enter kindergarten. The chance to meet-up at Miss Mollie's has given many Durham Early Head Start Home-Based parents the chance to meet others and become a part of a community.

"Our parents are encouraged to attend the playgroups and to join our parents' Policy Council, which makes important decisions about the program including hiring," Hargrove said. "It's great networking for parents to build community, find jobs, and get to know each other."

In the end, Miss Mollie's School of Grace is a more diverse, lively place in the afternoons and evenings. It's proving that community inclusion and collaboration has rewards for us all.

Since its beginnings in February 2010, Durham's Early Head Start Home-Based Program has been popular and now has a short waiting list. However, parents are always encouraged to apply. To learn more, contact Elisabeth Hargrove at the Durham Early Head Start Home-Based Program: (919) 419-3474 x 313. Applications are available at 1201 S. Briggs Avenue, Suite 110, Durham, NC 27703, phone (919) 439-7107.

Durham Connects is a collaboration of the Durham Family Initiative, itself a partnership of the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University and the Center for Child and Family Health, and the Durham County Health Department. It is funded by The Duke Endowment. For more information, please visit www.durhamconnects.org or call (919) 668-3279.