

Judy Centers and

Parents at a Judy Center help their children follow directions in order to complete a science experiment.



Community Schools

Raising Student Achievement by Supporting Children and Their Families

by Lauren Blundin

Summer may bring the end of another school year for most kids, but not for those living in communities fortunate enough to have a Judy Center. All summer long this year, the Judy Center at Hilltop Elementary School in Glen Burnie, Maryland, hosted playgroups and learning parties for community children (birth through kindergarten) and their parents.

In late July families gathered at the Hilltop Judy Center for a science-themed playgroup. Some families sat in chairs while others curled up on the floor, listening to playgroup leader Nancy Garcia read a story about air. Children answered her questions eagerly and, after the story, ran to the tables to begin an air-related science experiment involving water, food coloring, and paper. There was a gentle hum of conversation in several languages as adults and children completed the experiment together. Garcia, who speaks English and Spanish, floated through the classroom giving advice and encouragement. After the experiment, the children moved into the classroom's play area to listen to music and have fun with puppets and other toys.

One mother, Lynn, learned about the playgroup through the Maryland Infants and Toddlers Program, a Judy Center partner that is providing speech services to her toddler, a girl. Lynn cradled her infant while her toddler played with other children. A former teacher turned stay-at-home mother, Lynn recognizes the value of this social interaction for her daughter as well as the academic component of the playgroup. "I like that the playgroup includes a circle time," she says. "There are stories, and they talk about colors and shapes. It gives her an opportunity to listen and learn to focus."

Brandy is another mother who is enthusiastic about the Judy Center. Her two-year-old loves coming to the playgroups and other activities. The Judy Center is located on the grounds of the elementary school, and Brandy's son has been coming since birth. He already feels that he is part of the school, and Brandy says he can't wait to start kindergarten.

Many parents and caregivers, including Brandy, have taken advantage of the opportunities for adults at the Judy Center. Brandy says she has learned a lot from the behavioral-interventions workshop. "It taught us different techniques to discipline," she explains, "and it was also nice to sit and talk with other adults about behavioral challenges. You can know that 'Hey, it's not just me that is dealing with this!'"



Her favorite course, though, was on ways to teach her son math. “We count candies together, and then sort them by color. We toss toys in a bucket and count them. I incorporate math into play at home now.”

Amy Beal is the coordinator of the Hilltop Judy Center. “We’re educating parents as well as the children,” she points out. “We’re showing them ways to interact with their young child, and teaching them about the ages and stages of early childhood.”

Playgroups are just one of the innumerable tools that Judy Centers use to support families. Stimulating early learning experiences for children and their caregivers is a hallmark of Maryland’s Judy Centers—known officially as the Judith P. Hoyer Early Child Care and Family Education Centers. Judith Hoyer, who died in 1997, was an educator who championed early intervention and family support for Maryland’s low-income communities. Her vision for providing both educational and community services under one roof, where specialists could collaborate on different programs for children, was realized in 1993, with the opening of the Early Childhood and Family Center in Adelphi, Maryland. After Judith Hoyer’s death, her husband, U.S. representative and current Democratic whip Steny Hoyer, led the charge to fund Judy Centers throughout the state. In May 2000 that funding became part of Maryland law.

Maryland’s Focus on Early Intervention and Support for Children and Families

Judy Centers are targeted to low-income areas. They serve approximately 12,000 young children and their families who live in the communities surrounding 39 elementary schools in Maryland—schools in districts that qualify for funding from the federal Title I program. (Part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Title I provides extra instruction for students at risk of failing to meet states’ academic performance standards. While the Judy Centers do not receive Title I funding, which is meant for school-age children, Title I status serves as a measure of poverty in the school community and as a guide for the location of Judy Centers.)

Most Judy Centers are open year-round, seven to 12 hours a day—usually closer to 12—providing educational opportunities and support to families and children. The overall goal of the Judy Centers is to increase the number of children who enter Maryland schools ready to learn.

Judy Centers sometimes provide services directly, such as with the Hilltop Center playgroup, but many offerings are through collaborations with community-

based agencies, organizations, and businesses. For example, a local church may work with a Judy Center to provide clothing for families who need it. In one partnership, Northrop Grumman, a defense-contracting company, teamed with the Wolf Trap Foundation for the Performing Arts to bring the “STEM through the Arts” program to some Judy Centers—“STEM” referring to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. One Judy Center coordinated with its partner agencies (which include child and human services agencies) to hold an information session for parents on the kinds of benefits for which families may qualify. While Judy Centers are physically located in schools, the sizes of those locations—and thus the number of people they can reach—vary. Much of the centers’ effectiveness comes through their partnerships.

Power through Partnerships

“Each Judy Center has a formalized partnership with the local agencies, organizations, and businesses in the community,” according to Cheryl DeAtley, Judy Center partnerships specialist at the Maryland State Department of Education (DOE). The number of partners varies, depending on whether the Judy Center is in an urban or rural area and on the number of agencies and businesses in that area. Partnerships range from ten to 30 agencies and organizations. Judy Center coordinators and partners meet at least monthly to discuss upcoming activities and the

A mother helps her older child with an art project.



changing needs of the families they serve. “Our goal with our partnerships,” DeAtley explains, “is to have someone to turn to for every issue a family can come to us with.”

Services that the Judy Centers commonly arrange or provide directly include medical and dental care, adult education, parenting classes, and identification of early intervention services for children with special needs. Families requiring intensive support services receive home visits by Judy Center staff members. Judy Centers will also help families meet their most basic needs, such as for food and clothing.

Baltimore’s DRU Judy Center at John Eager Howard Elementary School recognized that its children and families needed help obtaining food. (“DRU” is an acronym based on the nearby communities of Druid Park, Reservoir Hill, and Upland. The main DRU center, at John Eager Howard, has two satellites—at the Samuel Coleridge-Taylor and Furman Templeton elementary schools.) Through a partnership with the Maryland Food Bank, the Judy Center has provided groceries to parents of the children it serves and to the larger school community. Parents are encouraged but not required to volunteer at the school in exchange for food.

On a Thursday in July of this year, a Judy Center father arrived at John Eager Howard to supervise the unloading of the Maryland Food Bank truck. School was out of session, but the building was bustling with children, teachers, and volunteers. A group of teens from the Baltimore City youth workers’ program took a break from helping in the summer-camp classrooms to help unload the boxes of food. A mother and her child arrived to help sort the food and pack bags to be distributed to other parents and community members.

Meeting Social and Emotional Needs

At the Judy Centers, a critical element of preparing children for kindergarten is meeting the mental health, social, and emotional needs of the boys and girls and their families. Through its partnership with the University of Maryland’s Secure Starts at the Taghi Modarressi Center for Infant Study (CIS), the DRU Judy Center at John Eager Howard Elementary School benefits from the services of Cecelia Parker, a full-time, on-site mental health consultant.

“I’m here every day,” Parker says. “I concentrate on strengthening families.” She teaches children social skills such as making friends and resolving conflicts. She also works with children individually and in small groups to address specific behavioral or emotional problems. In monthly workshops, Parker provides parents with information on a broad range of topics—everything from meeting children’s social and emotional needs to managing household finances.

Amy Beal, coordinator of the Judy Center at Hilltop Elementary School, holds balloons that will be given to children as they leave their weekly playgroup.

“I also provide them [with] coping resources,” Parker adds, “because most of our families live in areas where they are constantly affected by different traumas. And if parents need therapeutic services, they can also see me during my evening office hours.” DRU Judy Center coordinator Cathy Frazier applauds the University of Maryland CIS for developing the full-time mental health specialist model with Judy Centers. “After all,” Frazier says, “mental health issues can come up any time, not just on a Tuesday or a Thursday”—an allusion to the sporadic availability of mental health specialists in most public schools.

Expanding the School Day

Prompt access to services or referrals is another feature of Judy Centers. The centers provide or coordinate a number of programs to expand the school day and year for children. At the DRU Judy Center, for example, resources such as drop-in art classes, a computer lab, and after-school care and activities abound through a partner, the John Eager Howard Recreation Center. The DRU Judy Center has also started providing special summer camps for entering preschoolers and entering kindergartners. The camps are taught by John Eager Howard’s preschool and kindergarten teachers, so the children will start school in the fall already comfortable with their teachers and familiar with the classroom environment and routines.

The People Make the Program

“The people really make Judy Centers work,” DeAtley says. “The program coordinators we’ve put in place, the principals who are so supportive and understand the value of early intervention, our partners and parents—the people make it successful, because there isn’t a whole lot of money involved.”

A short conversation between Gale Carter, assistant principal at John Eager Howard Elementary, and DRU Judy Center coordinator Frazier captures the importance of having the support and active





Judy Centers emphasize parent participation during playgroups.

participation of everyone connected with the children—parents, teachers, and community members alike. “We go door to door in our community to make sure parents know what is available,” Carter says. “Early learning is a passion for me.”

“And that’s really important,” Frazier adds, referring to support and commitment from the school administration. “You need that top-down understanding of the importance and power of early support and intervention.” The field of early childhood education is based on research showing that children who have high-quality care and early learning experiences are more likely to enter kindergarten prepared to learn. Recent studies have also pointed to the impressive lifelong benefits of quality early childhood education. Researcher Lawrence Schweinhart analyzed data from the graduates of the High/Scope Perry Pre-school program, which serves Michigan three- and four-year-olds living in poverty and at risk of academic failure. Even at age 40, former participants demonstrated the positive effects of the program, as Schweinhart explained in a 2004 study: adults who at age three or four had attended the program were more likely to be employed, had higher incomes, had experienced fewer run-ins with the law, and had received more schooling than a control group of children who did not take part in similar programs.

Making the Most of Flat Funding

Although the number of Judy Centers has increased over the years, state funding for each center has not. Each one receives approximately \$322,000 a year, an amount virtually unchanged

since the program began. “Funding is flat, but we think of creative ways to fund programs,” says Frazier. By harnessing the services and capabilities of their partners, Judy Centers make effective use of the money they do receive.

“Every budget I review is very different,” DeAtley explains. “The needs of rural Garrett County in Western Maryland are different from those in more urban areas like Prince George’s County and Montgomery County. Some centers have to put a significant amount of money into behavioral and mental health interventions, while others hardly have a need for that. Some centers are focused on English Language Learners and parents learning English. There’s little restriction in what centers can use funding for, which is great, because they really need that flexibility.”

Judy Centers Get Results

Maryland’s Judy Centers are skillful at getting good results from limited funding. The most recent data from the Maryland DOE show that children who attend Judy Centers are more likely to be assessed as fully ready for kindergarten (86 percent) than their peers who do not benefit from the centers’ programs or services (79 percent). This increased readiness is a testament to the Judy Centers’ ability to support their diverse populations. For example, Judy Centers serve a much higher percentage of children who are receiving special services (including special education, English Language Learners services, Free and Reduced Price Meals, or a combination of those) than the state as a whole: in Maryland, 53 percent of all entering kindergartners received special services, compared with 71 percent of Judy

Center kindergartners. These data underscore the value and importance of early support for children and families and the important role Judy Centers play in early identification of and intervention for students with special needs.

“Sometimes it takes a whole village to improve a child’s readiness for kindergarten,” says Lillian Lowery, Maryland state superintendent of schools. “The Judy Centers bring that village together in one location. They have been an unqualified success.”

Despite their success, Judy Centers remain unique to Maryland in their narrow focus on children from birth through age five and their families living in Title 1 school communities. On the other hand, the partnership strategy and the focus on supporting the entire family have also been employed with success in the form of community schools. In fact, one of the strongest advocates of community schools is Congressman Hoyer, who has called for a Judy Center–like approach to serving students in elementary school through high school.

The Rise of Full-Service Community Schools

In each Congress since 2004, Congressman Hoyer has introduced legislation for the Full-Service Community Schools Act in the House. Senator Ben Nelson has introduced companion bills in the Senate. The legislation would authorize a U.S. Department of Education grant program to expand full-service community schools across the U.S. While the grant program has not been authorized, over \$40 million has been appropriated since 2008 to fund 21 community-school projects around the country.

“Full-service community schools tap into community resources to provide students and their families with access to a wide range of services that improve student achievement and ensure families are prepared to support learning,” Congressman Hoyer says. “In Maryland, Judy Centers have proven to be effective when it comes to the integration of education, health and social service delivery, and this model should be a key part of our

national efforts to improve educational outcomes for students and expand middle-class opportunity.”

The types of services coordinated at full-service community schools include remedial education and academic enrichment, parental involvement and family literacy, mentoring and other youth development, mental health and counseling services, early childhood education, programs for truant, suspended, or expelled students, primary health and dental care, job training and career-counseling services, and nutrition services.

Matthew Whooley of Indianapolis is responsible for the care of his nephew, who attends George Washington Community High School (GWCHS); originally George Washington High School, it closed in 1995 and reopened as GWCHS in 2001. Whooley also has three children who attend Stephen Foster Elementary School, or School 67, a feeder school for GWCHS. “GWCHS has allowed me to become a fully involved parent [who] is in the school on a daily basis . . .,” Whooley says. “I have found that the community school keeps parents more involved with teachers, coaches and administrators than the regular school model does. It inspires a more family-like atmosphere in the building and throughout the neighborhoods. A large advantage to having community partners is that our children can see that the entire community is supporting them and their education. It is such an amazing motivational tool for our children. It gives [me] as a parent reassurance that raising my children’s education is a team effort. . . . Being able to count on the local businesses and other community entities to give our children extra support and opportunities makes it easier as parents. In my opinion every school in the country should be a community school.”

Community Schools: A National Snapshot

The Full-Service Community Schools Act builds on an existing community-schools movement that has been growing for more than 20 years. The Coalition for Community Schools (CCS), a research and advocacy organization operating under the Institute

Learn More about Community Schools

- Visit www.MarylandPublicSchools.org for more information on the Judith P. Hoyer Early Child Care and Family Education Centers (“Judy Centers”)
- See <http://www.communityschools.org/> for research, toolkits, and advocacy resources from the Coalition for Community Schools
- Go to <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/communityschools/> for information from the U.S. Department of Education on the Full-Service Community Schools Program
- Consult <http://nationalcenterforcommunityschools.childrensaidsociety.org/> for technical assistance in creating community schools from the National Center for Community Schools, an organization founded by the Children’s Aid Society in response to demands for help and advice in creating community schools

for Educational Leadership in Washington, D.C., has been advocating for community schools since 1997. It is difficult to obtain an exact count of community schools because there is no one formal model for such a school. However, CCS's director, Martin Blank, estimates that there are as many as 5,000 institutions in 65 locations that self-identify as such and operate under a community-schools approach.

Taking advantage of existing resources to maximize services to children and families is a characteristic of both Judy Centers and community schools. The strategy is paying off.

The Children's Aid Society (CAS) has a long-standing community-schools initiative that is thriving in New York City. Since 1992

A playgroup participant contemplates whether to keep his balloon or conduct an experiment by releasing it to see what will happen.



the CAS has partnered with the New York City Department of Education in 16 community schools. A recent CAS report found that “Children’s Aid community schools produce better student and teacher attendance, increased grade retention, more appropriate referrals to special education services, improved test scores and higher parent involvement than similar schools.”

Like CAS schools, community schools across the U.S. are reporting positive results as well. A recent Coalition for Community Schools review of (self-identified) community schools around the nation found that these institutions are seeing significantly improved outcomes for students in a number of areas, with children entering school fully prepared to learn; developing better work habits and attitudes toward learning; showing improved grades and test scores; earning more high school credits; and graduating from high school.

Here are just a few of the many success stories uncovered by CCS:

- In schools most successfully implementing the Tulsa Area Community Schools Initiative, students have significantly outperformed their peers in state math and reading exams (by 32 points and 19 points, respectively).
- Since the implementation of Community Learning Centers, in 2000, Cincinnati high school graduation rates have increased from 51 percent to over 80 percent.
- Students in seven high schools in Portland, Oregon’s Schools Uniting Neighborhoods (SUN) community-schools initiative made a number of impressive achievements, including increasing the average number of credits earned per year from 5.1 to 6.8, a pace that puts SUN students on track to graduate.

Community Schools’ Outlook for the Future

Judy Centers and community schools are effective in using limited resources to obtain positive results among low-income communities and at-risk student populations. Several studies have concluded that the community-schools approach provides a remarkably high return on investment. The Finance Project, a Washington, D.C.–based nonprofit group, investigated the social return on investment (SROI) of two of the CAS’s community schools in the Washington Heights area of New York City; its finding was that every dollar spent returned \$10.30 and \$14.80, respectively, of social value, or the value generated through an investment in the schools. Other studies have reached similar conclusions.

Schools are struggling to meet ever-increasing standards for student achievement, even as their populations continue to grow more diverse and complex. Together, the Judy Center approach to early childhood education and family support, and the community-schools approach to supporting older children and families, could provide educators with a solution to their challenge. ■