



## New Early Childhood Education Center Opens in High-Need Linden Neighborhood: City-School District Partnership

The Linden-McKinley High School Marching Band performed outside the refurbished Linden Park Neighborhood Early Childhood Education Center front door. Students from Northland and Columbus Alternative High School greeted each arrival. The gym was full of parents, community leaders, early childhood advocates, and elected officials.

Several classrooms of earnest four-year-olds led the Pledge of Allegiance. "We plan to graduate high school in 2030." The startled audience tried to calculate their own ages in 2030.

Principal Candace Nespeca pointed out that these students had only been in school since early September. One teacher said afterwards that she has nine students. Only three of the nine knew any letters and then only the letters in their name. Most are learning about lower-case and capital letters. Several have special education needs.

The principal and teachers are proud of the welcoming feel of the school. The principal described how she was leading a nervous mother and son to his classroom for the first time when another boy who was generally very quiet pointed to the new boy's t-shirt and said, "I like dinosaurs, too." Then, the quiet boy reached out to shake his hand and said "Welcome." Then, everyone relaxed.

More than 60 preschoolers are enrolled in classrooms run by Columbus City Schools, Columbus Early Learning Centers, and Child Development Council Head Start. Next year, the center plans to serve 200 children by partnering with additional early learning providers. The center provides professional development and lesson planning to private agencies and individual providers in the neighborhood. While the programming and operation of the center are handled by Columbus City Schools, funding for the center comes from a collaboration of the district, city, and the Ohio Department of Education.

Superintendent Dan Good thanked Rhonda Johnson, Director of the Mayor's Office of Education, for her leadership. Good pointed out that the goal of the center was to help four-year-olds prepare to enter kindergarten at age five with improved skills in language, numbers, and problem-solving. He cited research showing that better preparation for kindergarten correlates with improved performance on the third grade reading test and also with higher graduation rates. As a result, the Columbus City Schools have added 22% more seats in its high-quality prekindergarten program over the past four years. Good also praised the Linden-McKinley Panthers Marching Band as a positive in a neighborhood with several recent challenges.

Mayor Andrew Ginther declared that one of his most important jobs as mayor is to support schools. Ginther praised the center and said it was another important step in the movement to provide preschool for all children in Columbus.

Ginther also announced that he and the Columbus Department of Parks and Recreation plans to upgrade the 50-acre Linden Park which abuts the school. Linden Park is same size as Schiller Park in German Village.

City Council Education Committee Chair Liz Brown and School Board President Gary Baker pledged continuing support for expanding preschool programs. Brown suggested inviting the students to lead the Pledge of Allegiance at a City Council meeting.

The program closed with the four-year-olds singing "This is my school family" with great enthusiasm. "That song sums up our school" said the principal.

A video with highlights of the day can be found at <https://youtu.be/GzObVQ80iRM>