



THE FIRST TWO YEARS OF ATLANTA'S  
DUNBAR LEARNING COMPLEX

climbing  
the ladder  
of reading proficiency

The Dunbar Learning Complex is part of a comprehensive community change effort underway in Atlanta's Neighborhood Planning Unit V with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation-Atlanta Civic Site. Since 2001, Casey has utilized research and data-informed best practices to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and families in this area by focusing on three interconnected results: Education Achievement, Family Economic Success, and Neighborhood Transformation.





Every weekday morning, Director Steve White and 40 teachers welcome 206 children to the Early Learning and Literacy Resource Center in Atlanta. Upstairs in the same building, Principal Karen Brown-Collier and 30 full-time teachers welcome 385 students to Dunbar Elementary School. These children and their parents are benefiting from an innovative learning complex that provides high-quality education to children from six weeks of age through fifth grade, ensuring that every child is:

**Healthy and ready for school by age 5    Reading to learn by age 8**



T: Royal Spence attends the ELLRC while his mother takes advantage of programs offered at The Center for Working Families, Inc. L: Dunbar Elementary School Principal Karen Brown-Collier with students. R: ELLRC Director Steve White welcomes a father and child.





*This unique educational model was launched in January 2010. Since then, 374 children, ages six weeks to PreK, have enrolled at the ELLRC and 385 are currently enrolled at Dunbar Elementary School, an Atlanta public school serving children from kindergarten through fifth grade.*

*This report tells how a group of parents, educators, community-based service providers, funders, and education experts created this world-class learning complex with the ambition of permanently changing the trajectory of children living in poverty. It also shares the impact of those efforts, two years later, on children and their parents.*

## the place

The Dunbar Learning Complex is located in Atlanta's Mechanicsville neighborhood, less than a mile from City Hall and the State Capitol. In the shadow of these institutions, this historic, predominantly African-American community is emerging as one of Atlanta's best neighborhoods for hard-working, low-income families to live, work, and play.

In 2007, a \$144 million, mixed-income Atlanta Housing Authority complex of 800 apartments opened in Mechanicsville. The neighboring 14-acre park was also renovated, including a new pool, playground, and athletic fields. Family-supporting programs are offered nearby at the Dunbar Neighborhood Center, which houses The Center for Working Families, Inc., The Center for Black Women's Wellness, and the Atlanta Civic Site.

The Dunbar Learning Complex, the result of \$20 million in public and private investments, shares the same city block as these community assets, providing children and their families with world-class educational opportunities.

### The Dunbar Learning Complex

Research on the importance of the first eight years of a child's life is clear—if a child has the benefit of a high-quality education from birth to third grade, that child will be set on a pathway to success in school and adult life.

In 2007, the Atlanta Civic Site convened parents, local educators, and partners with the ambitious goal of creating a world-class learning complex that would provide area children with high-quality educational opportunities throughout those critical years. Lead partners were Sheltering Arms Early Education and Family Centers, Atlanta Public Schools, and the Atlanta Civic Site. Parents and residents worked with these partners and a number of state agencies, private funders, and service providers to raise funds and design the Complex—transforming Dunbar Elementary School into an educational complex that serves children from birth through fifth grade. Experts, including the Foundation for Child Development, Center for the Study of Social Policy, National Black Child Development Institute, Voices for Georgia's

L: Dunbar Elementary School was renovated in 2010 to include the Early Learning and Literacy Resource Center. R: Columbia at Mechanicsville, located next door to the Dunbar Learning Complex, opened in 2007, providing high-quality, affordable housing.



Children, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, shared advice and best practices as they identified evidence-based practices, programs, curricula, and supports that ensure children from low-income families become proficient readers and successful students. United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta has provided critical funding and support for programs in the new Complex.

In January 2010, the Dunbar Learning Complex welcomed the first group of children at the ELLRC and Dunbar Elementary. These institutions, with aligned curricula, assessments, and standards, enable children to *learn to read* by the end of third grade so that they can *read to learn* throughout life.

The Complex's promising early results are attracting national attention. The ELLRC has been selected to become an Educare center, joining an elite network of some of the highest-performing early learning centers serving children at risk of academic failure. Through careful data analysis and evaluation, the Educare network is demonstrating that starting early and providing high-quality care and early learning can eliminate the achievement gap between low-income children and their higher-income peers.

L: ELLRC PreK students and their parents visit kindergarten classes at Dunbar to prepare for the new school year. R: Johnnie Thomas, a registered nurse, works on-site at the ELLRC, ensuring that children have access to high-quality health care.



### World-Class Design

Children must be ready to succeed when they get to school (cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically). To achieve this, they need high-quality learning opportunities, beginning at birth. As a world-class model, the Dunbar Learning Complex achieves this through:

- *A focus on evidence-based practices and programs*—Teachers receive ongoing training from The Rollins Center for Language and Literacy, a renowned early literacy leader. Evidence-based curricula—including *Opening the World of Learning* at the ELLRC and *Success For All* at Dunbar—ensure that children develop strong language and literacy skills. The *4Rs Program* (Reading, Writing, Respect, and Resolution) encourages positive social and emotional behaviors by integrating conflict resolution into the language arts curriculum.
- *A focus on the whole family*—Our “two-generation approach” builds the employment and parenting skills of parents while we educate their children.
- *A focus on helping parents advocate for quality*—The parent networks empower parents to advocate for quality child care and educational programs.
- *A focus on health*—Child health services prevent health issues from impacting learning and development.



- *A focus on research and evaluation*—Independent and in-house evaluations support continuous improvements and by tracking the students who remain in the Atlanta school system through graduation, we will demonstrate the long-term impact of this model.
- *A focus on replication and sustainability*—We share this model with others so the programs can be replicated.
- *A focus on community*—Sheltering Arms’ Child Development Associate Credential training prepares area residents to secure employment at the ELLRC where they can educate children in their own community.

## Our Two-Generation Approach

Through our partnership with The Center for Working Families, Inc. (TCWFI), we are breaking the cycle of poverty by promoting the economic well-being of parents while ensuring that children are healthy, thriving, and developing on track toward becoming proficient readers.

Currently, 80 percent of ELLRC students have a parent enrolled at TCWFI. A total of 311 children and their 256 parents have benefited from these two-generation supports since January 2010.

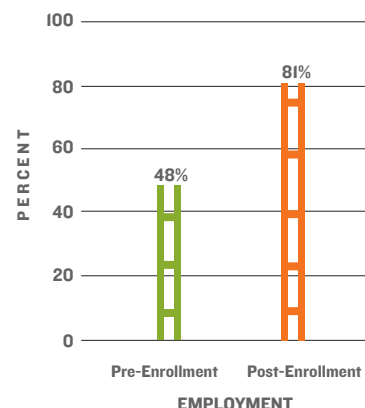
In August 2010, 73 of the children in the ELLRC’s preschool and PreK classes had parents who were enrolled at TCWFI where they were accessing workforce development and employment services and work supports such as TANF, food stamps, and the EITC.

These children made impressive educational gains as their parents have advanced financially. The percentage of children who were below the 30th percentile on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT), dropped by 23 percentage points that year, while the percentage of children scoring above the 50th percentile, increased by 12 points (see chart 1). While their children were receiving high-quality, subsidized early care and learning, the parents have been able to secure jobs and have seen their wages increase. The employment rate of their 67 parents increased by 33 percentage points (see chart 2) and the mean weekly wage increased by \$35 for the 32 parents who had been employed before accessing subsidized child care (see chart 3).

**CHART 1  
VOCABULARY GAINS**

	2011	2012
Below 30th Percentile	67%	44%
Above 50th Percentile	11%	23%

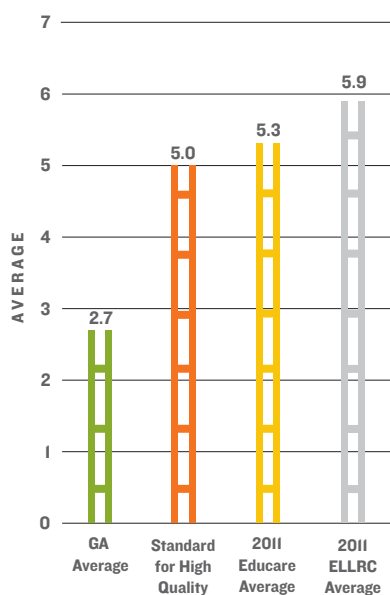
**CHART 2  
EMPLOYMENT GAINS**



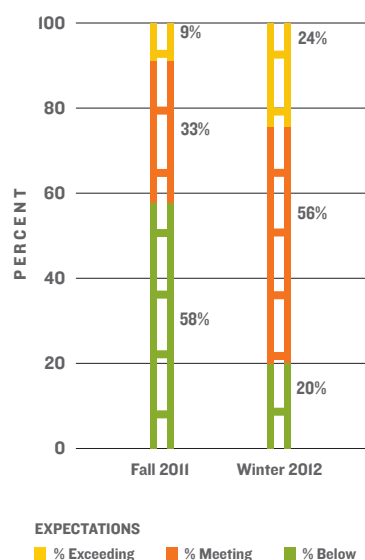
**CHART 3  
WEEKLY WAGE GAINS**



**CHART 4**  
**INFANT TODDLER CLASSROOM**  
**RATING SCALE**



**CHART 5**  
**PERCENTAGE OF ALL ELLRC INFANTS,**  
**TODDLERS, AND PRESCHOOLERS**  
**MEETING WIDELY HELD**  
**EXPECTATIONS IN LITERACY**



## starting early, starting right

### The Early Learning and Literacy Resource Center

The early years are a crucial time in brain development. Children's experiences from birth through age three have a profound effect on their educational, social, and physical potential.

During these critical years, the ELLRC provides children with high-quality care and learning to ensure they develop a strong foundation of cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional skills. It also engages parents and empowers them to support their children's healthy development.

The ELLRC is staffed and managed by Sheltering Arms, one of Georgia's most respected child care providers. It has functioned at capacity since early 2010, offering all-day, year-round care to children from six weeks of age through PreK. Combining public and private funding, it provides children and their families with high-quality early care and learning and family-strengthening supports.

The ELLRC hosts monthly parent meetings on topics related to child development, health, and literacy, and offers a unique, center-based Parents As Teachers program providing personal visits for families with young children. Parents also access information on child development in the Parent Resource Room.

Through the *Healthy Beginnings* System of Care, a full-time registered nurse is on-site, employed by Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, to help families access health insurance, strengthen relationships with their child's primary health care physician, and ensure that the child's immunizations and developmental screenings are up-to-date.



L: Ms. Pennamon engages her PreK students in interactive learning at the ELLRC. R: Student art and educational images are displayed throughout the ELLRC.



### New Opportunities for Children and Adults in NPU-V

Telisha “Penny” Pennamon built a successful career in retail while raising her son near Mechanicsville. Her son has excelled in school and he encouraged her to become a teacher to help other children succeed.

She took his advice and, in 2008, enrolled in Sheltering Arms’ Child Development Associate Credential training. In 2011, she began teaching PreK at the ELLRC and earned an associate’s degree in early childhood education. She is now making plans to complete her bachelor’s degree.

“I think we are doing some great things and I can’t wait to watch as more data and statistics come back to show the impact we are having on children and parents,” Pennamon says. “I can’t wait to see the impact of this on the rest of the country.”

5.9

The Infant and Toddler Classrooms scored 5.9 on a scale of 7 in an evaluation of classroom quality — above the 2011 Educare average (5.3) and the standard for high quality (5.0) and doubling the score of a representative sample of licensed Georgia child care centers (2.7).

97%

of the children enrolled in *Healthy Beginnings* are up-to-date on their immunizations.

99%

of children in *Healthy Beginnings* have a primary care physician.

80%

The percentage of children in the Infant, Toddler, and Preschool classes that met or exceeded expectations increased by 38 percentage points from Fall 2011 to Winter 2012, reaching 80 percent.

Since Royal Spence enrolled at the ELLRC, his mother has been impressed by his progress. She has also been able to secure employment through The Center for Working Families, Inc.



### Developing an Early Love of Learning

Reynelle Spence moved near Mechanicsville in early 2011 and came to the ELLRC in search of a quality educational opportunity for her three-year-old son, Royal.

“I knew right away my baby had to go to that school,” remembers Spence.

Royal had previously been enrolled in two early learning centers. One was in a beautiful facility that did not stress learning and the second offered a strong curriculum in a dingy facility. “At Sheltering Arms, I have both!” she shares.

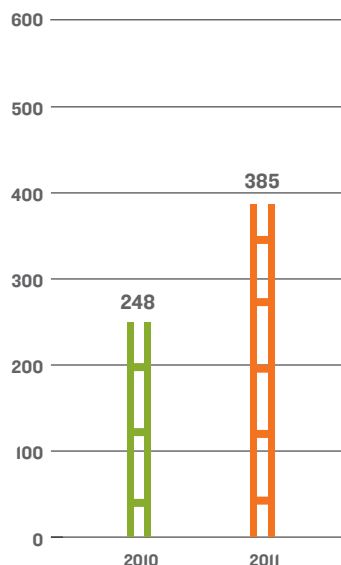
Spence knows her son is accumulating the knowledge and skills that will help him be successful in school and life. “My son’s teacher monitors his milestones and we work together so I can reinforce his learning,” she explains.

She worked with ELLRC’s on-site nurse to find a more accessible primary care physician for Royal and meets regularly with the Parents As Teachers coach to explore activities that can support Royal’s development and learning.

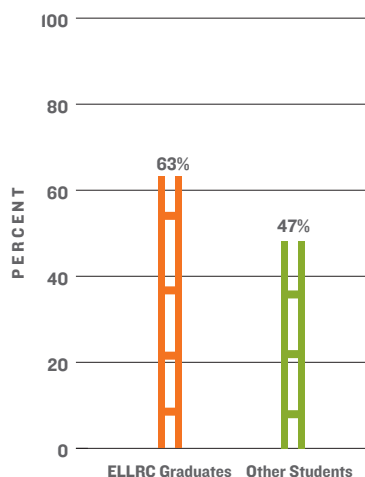




**CHART 6  
DUNBAR STUDENT ENROLLMENT**



**CHART 7  
PERCENTAGE OF DUNBAR KINDERGARTEN  
STUDENTS READING AT OR ABOVE GRADE  
LEVEL, FALL 2011**



## learning to read, reading to learn

### Dunbar Elementary School

Dunbar Elementary builds on the foundation of early literacy provided by the ELLRC, helping children become strong readers and successful students.

The adjoining schools work with students and their families to prepare children to transition into kindergarten. ELLRC teachers share information about the students' learning and development with their kindergarten teachers and Dunbar Elementary hosts events to welcome students and their families.

In the fall of 2011, 32 children transitioned from the ELLRC to Dunbar Elementary, comprising 44 percent of the incoming class. The benefit of the ELLRC's early learning programs was apparent in their performance on the *Success For All* assessment in the fall of 2011. Only 47 percent of kindergarten students who had not attended the ELLRC were reading at or above grade level while 63 percent of ELLRC graduates were reading at or above grade level.

For students needing additional supports, Dunbar Elementary offers programs to help them. The Dunbar Learning Academy offers academic and social-emotional support to students after school and Communities In Schools helps students improve attendance and behavior, access academic enrichment activities, and obtain basic necessities.



L: Second graders at Dunbar engaged in a writing exercise as part of the *Success For All* curriculum. R: Dunbar students arriving at school.



55%

Enrollment at Dunbar Elementary has increased by 55 percent since 2010–2011 and is now 385.

63%

of students with ELLRC experience were reading on or above grade level when they enrolled at Dunbar, as compared to only 47 percent of students who did not have ELLRC experience.

55%

The percentage of incoming kindergarten students that were reading at or above grade level increased to 55 percent in 2011 from 6 percent in 2010 after the ELLRC had been in operation for one full school year.

20%

First grade students enrolled in the Dunbar Learning Academy increased their reading proficiency in the *Success For All* assessment by 20 percent.

### A Jump Start on Learning

Karlos Walters enrolled at the ELLRC when he was three and, last August, he transitioned into Dunbar Elementary. Over the summer, Karlos and his family attended Countdown to Kindergarten events at the school and met his teacher and new classmates.

“Karlos was a little bit nervous,” remembers Noreal Johnson, Karlos’s surrogate father. “But going to kindergarten was easier because it is in the same building.”

Karlos has been excelling in his new environment. He is in the school’s gifted program and is earning high marks.

“His teacher says his performance is off the charts,” boasts Johnson. “The curriculum [at the ELLRC] gives them an extra boost.”

### Building New Reading Skills

With nine years of experience teaching, Angele Waddell joined the ELLRC as a PreK teacher in January 2010. In August 2011, she transitioned upstairs, teaching second grade at Dunbar Elementary.

Using the *Success For All* curriculum, a proven whole-school approach that focuses on reading, she helps students become proficient readers. “*Success For All* uses ‘spiral review,’” explains Waddell. “We constantly review what was covered before, keeping students’ skills fresh as they build new ones.”

“I am a product of public schools and I know they can work,” she adds. “I teach because I thrive on helping children succeed.”





The logic is quite clear from an economic standpoint. We can invest early to close disparities and prevent achievement gaps, or we can pay to remediate disparities when they are harder and more expensive to close. **Either way we are going to pay.**

—James J. Heckman, Nobel Prize winner in Economics



T: The Word Wall helps students recognize and spell words.  
 L: Karlos Walters and his parents walk to Dunbar Elementary where he is attending kindergarten. R: Ms. Waddell works with both first and second graders to ensure that they are on track to achieve reading proficiency by the end of third grade.



## The Annie E. Casey Foundation

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