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Belleville Schools Celebrate the Opening of the Hornblower Early Childhood Center

Center to be the Crown Jewel in the District's "Belleville Beginners" Program

BELLEVILLE, NJ – Dec. 22, 2020 – Building blocks stood ready to be assembled into skyscrapers. Plastic dinosaurs packed in buckets held back their prodigious roars. Crayons and paper dutifully waited to be turned into refrigerator-ready masterpieces.

The Hornblower Early Childhood Center on Main Street looked light, bright, and inviting to children of all ages as officials from the local, county and state levels participated in its official ribbon-cutting ceremony Saturday.

The five-classroom facility is the crown jewel in the district's Belleville Beginners program, which believes it's never too early to cultivate critical thinkers and creative minds.

Superintendent of Schools Dr. Richard Tomko was joined by State Senator Teresa Ruiz, Assistant State Education Commissioner Cary Booker, Essex County Executive Superintendent (and Belleville native) Joseph Zarra and others for the big event.

"What a great thing for the kids and families of Belleville – for generations of families to come," Tomko said. "We are giving our youngest learners, ages 3 and 4, a critical head start in their education and in their lives. This is a phenomenal opportunity for the entire Belleville community."

The Hornblower Center was funded with state Preschool Expansion Aid. The township is able to provide early childhood education at no cost to families.

During the planning process for the new facility, Tomko partnered with Ruiz, Belleville Mayor Michael Melham and others to identify the space, help customize floor plans and leverage state funding for maximum benefit.

Ruiz, a former preschool teacher, called the money spent to the Hornblower Center an investment in the future of Belleville. "We know that in early childhood education, for every dollar you spend, you get back so much more," she said.

After the ribbon-cutting ceremony, Ruiz, Booker and Zarra were joined on a tour of the center by members of the Belleville Board of Education. There were signs everywhere that the school is serious about safeguarding children and teachers from the pandemic, such as a bottle of sanitizer rechristened “Germ Juice.”

Hornblower Principal Michael Vargas, who also serves as the director of preschool for the district, said the ribbon-cutting ceremony was put on hold from September while staff and students got comfortable in their new surroundings.

He said Belleville uses a state-standardized Creative Curriculum model aimed at fostering the imaginations of the 75 pupils enrolled.

“Our rooms are set up systematically and methodically,” Vargas explained. “One area is a writing center. Then we have a curiosity center. Then we have a dramatic center where the students can play dress up, and so on.”

Tomko said there are already plans to expand the Hornblower Early Childhood Center, creating nine more classrooms. The addition would center on the pre-K student population that currently uses other district schools and is taught through private providers the district contracts with.

The expansion will also help the district educate as many pre-K students as possible. Belleville was educating about 14% of the students in its “universe” a years ago, school official said. This year, that number has increased to 37%. With the expansion projected to be completed during the 2021-22 school year, Belleville will be providing free education to more than 70% of its pre-K student population.

“This is a proud day for our district,” said Board of Education President Christine Lamparello. “Cutting that ceremonial ribbon is the culmination of a lot of hard work by a lot of educators in our town. We are giving these children and their families the greatest gift they can ever receive: a free education, from the earliest of years.”

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