

Preschool helps kids who need nurturing

St. Vincent's Day Home overcomes obstacles to provide positive social environment Preschool wants to make big difference

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OAKLAND — Many of the toddlers and young children who are dropped off every day at St. Vincent's Day Home come from backgrounds that, statistically, don't bode well for their future.

Nearly all of the children who attend the West Oakland preschool live in poverty.

Some are homeless, or have been exposed to drugs. Some of their mothers are victims of domestic violence.

RAND Corp. studies released last week found that the academic disparities between poor, black and Latino children and their more affluent, white and Asian peers exist the moment they start school.

Researchers also found that in California, few incentives exist to offer quality preschools to the kids who need it the most.

But Corinne Mohrmann, director of St. Vincent's, has devoted her career to helping her charges develop the self-respect, the social skills and the interest in learning they will need to thrive in school and in life. "It's very difficult to change human behavior and you have to do that from the very beginning — to nurture that love for learning, to help children understand there are consequences for their actions, but tremendous joy in good choices," she said.

St. Vincent's has served more than 30,000 children since it opened in 1911. Each day, 230 of them sing, nap, eat and play at the Queen Anne Victorian building on Eighth Street. The day home was once run by Catholic nuns, Sisters of the Holy Family, but it is now a nonsectarian, nonprofit organization.

The center is open for about 10 hours each day, a long stretch of time for young children to be apart from their families. They eat breakfast and lunch together at round tables in a dining room, a setting designed to feel more like home.

The classrooms have various "group work" stations with art projects, puzzles, books, dress-up clothes, music and blocks. Teachers keep journals to track

students' progress. There is one adult for every four 2-year-olds, and one for every eight 3- and 4-year-olds.

Scott Moore, a senior policy adviser for Preschool California, an Oakland-based preschool advocacy campaign, said publicly funded programs of St. Vincent's caliber are rare.

"This is what we want everybody to be able to get to," he said.

That goal is difficult, Moore said, when the standards for each program vary so widely, if they exist at all.

Some of the programs were not created with child development in mind, RAND researchers found. In 22 counties, including Alameda, day care providers who are exempt from licensing regulations actually receive more funding per student through vouchers (\$45 per day) than programs such as St. Vincent's (\$32 per day).

Policy analysts and educators say low pay and high staff turnover are among the greatest obstacles to quality preschools. Mohrmann says some child care centers pay teachers minimum wage.

Deborah Stipek, dean of the school of education at Stanford University, said the low wages make it difficult to have a trained staff. Teachers who have the experience and education needed for quality preschools often leave for better-paying jobs, she said.

"Until we start requiring higher levels of education for preschool teachers and paying them a living wage, I don't think we're going to see a huge amount of progress," Stipek said.

St. Vincent's 30 teachers either have a bachelor's degree or are working toward one. Moore said they receive higher wages and better benefits than many other places, which is one explanation for St. Vincent's low turnover rate.

Still, new teachers start at just \$12 an hour — just under \$25,000, over 12 months. Lead teachers start at \$37,000 a year. By contrast, teachers in the Oakland school district earn \$38,000 to \$69,000 for less than 10 months a year — wages that are still lower than in many nearby districts.

"I can't tell you how many people we've trained for Oakland Unified," Mohrmann said.

St. Vincent's \$5.4 million endowment brings its per-student funding to \$45. Without that money, it couldn't afford a nutritionist, a speech therapist or a program director to coach the teachers, Mohrmann said.

But, Mohrmann said, it takes more than money to create a top-notch early child care center.

"Money does help a lot of things," she said. "It doesn't necessarily drive quality, unless there's commitment there."

Or, as she likes to put it, "fire in the belly."

Alicia Winbush, a lead teacher, grew up in West Oakland and first began working at the center as a parent-volunteer. At the time, Winbush had ambitions of working in the technology sector. Then she changed her mind.

"It was like something I felt in my heart," she said.

Nearly seven years later, Winbush is still there. She said she has stayed because she has been treated with respect and has been given opportunities to grow professionally. But more than anything else, she said, she feels great fulfillment in the work.

"One thing I've noticed with my co-workers is that if it is not in their heart to work with children, they're not going to stay," she said.

Mohrmann, who in September was named Outstanding Bay Area Catholic Woman of the Year, said she looks for that passion when she hires her staff. The center aims to cultivate academic skills, she said, but that isn't the day home's main focus.

"My first priority is that children leave us with a healthy self-concept. If they leave us feeling good about who they are and what they want to be, they will work for that," Mohrmann said. "It's the self-doubt, the belittling, the tearing down of the human spirit that prevents people from succeeding."