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A learning environment that reaches for the stars

The Early Learning Coalition's guidance program almost a guarantee of success

BY [MARY KELLI PALKA](#) | STORY UPDATED AT 6:33 AM ON SATURDAY, FEB. 21, 2009

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Photos

BOB SELF/The Times-Union
 Children play under the watchful eyes of toy dinosaurs in a classroom for 2-year-olds at A Bright Beginning Childcare on Baymeadows Road. A Bright Beginning owner Tracy Bigham said as soon as she heard about the Guiding Stars program, she wanted to take part in it.

On the outside, the child-care centers that have received top ratings in the Early Learning Coalition's Guiding Stars program couldn't look more different.

Some of the centers are in strip malls. Others are in business complexes. Many are in standalone buildings. All of them are spread out throughout Jacksonville.

But inside they have much in common.

Their employees have more training than is required by law; their instructor-to-child ratios are better than the state mandates; and the quality of the education they receive is consistently high.

The voluntary Guiding Stars program was launched in 2004 and is operated by the Early Learning Coalition of Duval, a state agency tasked with overseeing the local school-readiness programs. There are 31 coalitions in the state (including one for Putnam and St. Johns counties), but Duval was one of the first to implement a quality rating system.

The coalition released the ratings of 23 more centers last week, bringing the number of centers that have completed the two-year program to 88. Twenty-one of those centers received five stars, the highest possible on the system that looks at the learning environment, staff qualifications, size of classes, curriculum and how the program operates.

Even the centers that have earned one or two stars have achieved more than is required by state laws.

When a center director opts to go through Guiding Stars, the coalition arranges coaches, people who specialize in early childhood education, for two years. The coaches demonstrate proper ways to educate children, then work with staff in their actual classrooms. The coalition also provides grants to help employees get training, incentive pay for staff who earn higher educational degrees and money for a variety of furniture, playground equipment, books and other materials.

Another 96 centers are going through the program now but haven't been rated. The goal is to expand the program to at least 75 percent of the 400 centers in Duval County, not including home child-care centers, before July 2011, said Susan Main, the coalition's executive director. Although the coalition has focused on helping centers that take lower-income children, it has expanded to help any center that wants to participate, Main said.

The timing for the goal coincides with when Mayor John Peyton leaves office because of term limits, Main said. She said Peyton has made early learning a priority and the city

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Little People Child Care II, 5606 Lenox Ave.
 Parks Place Day Care & Learning Center, 5500 W. Shindler Drive
 Strive For Excellence Learning Academy, 7595 Wendell Drive
 Christ The King Child Care, 6814 Larkin Road
 Episcopal Children's Center/duPont, 7373 S. Old Kings Road
 Kid'S Point Of View Learning Center, 2851-5 Edgewood Ave. N.
 St. Catherine's Episcopal Preschool, 4758 Shelby Ave.

4 stars

Kidsville 2000, Inc., 2553 Soutel Drive
 Victorious Learning Center, 2629 Edison Ave.
 Community Academy Of Jacksonville, Inc., 2655 Community Road
 Aldridge Day Care, 2721 Penton St.
 Beverly Hills Center, 3731 Rogers Ave.
 Christian Heritage Academy, 3930 University Blvd. S.
 Kids Korner I, 25 East 65th St.
 Pokey's Angelic Christian Children's Academy, 3863 St. Augustine Road
 Southpoint Early Learning Center, 5809 Southpoint Parkway
 Successful Kids Child Care, 4541 Shirley Ave. Suites 3&4
 The Innovative Learning Place Inc., 5014 San Juan Ave.
 Chatmans Day Care Inc., 1614 Leonid Road
 Alpha Omega Pre School, 2004 Hyde Park Road
 Gateway Nursery And Kindergarten, 641 W. Fourth St.
 It's A Small World, 6723 Golfview St.
 Just For Kids Learning Center, 11269 North Main St.
 La Petite Academy, 50 St. John Bluff Road
 As We Grow Preschool & Early Learning Center, 8927 Lem Turner Road
 Aunt Barbara'S Child Development Center No. 2 203 W. 48th St, Suite 9
 Genesis Learning Center, Inc, 10866 Lem Turner Road
 Heavenly Angels Learning Center, 2318 W. 13th St.
 J & J Day Care & Learning Center, 1420 Oakhurst Ave.
 Kingdom Kids Learning Center, 8668 Lem Turner Road
 Family Partners, 3003 Claire Lane

3 stars

Little Blessings Christian Learning Center, 1822 W. 30th St.
 Tomorrow'S Stars Learning Center, 4027 Moncrief Road
 Lane Avenue Development Center, 1650 S. Lane Ave.
 The Sunshine House Inc., 3993 San Jose Park Drive
 Burrells Day Care, 4162 Spring Park Circle
 Chappell (FCCJ Downtown), 101 W. State St.
 For Your Child Only IV, 2135 Kings Road
 His Kids Day Care, 8376 Normandy Blvd.
 Lone Star Learning Center, 8142 Lone Star Road
 Miracles From Above Pre-School Academy, 814 Ellis Road S.
 Oak Crest Child Care, 5900 Ricker Road
 Smitty's Day Care, 7710 Hilsdale Road
 Community Connections (Florence Davis), 325 East Duval St.
 Fort Caroline Baptist Academy, 11428 McCormick Road
 Ft. Caroline Christian, 8510 Ft. Caroline Road
 Gingerbread House Learning Day Care Center, 6005 Chester Ave.
 Northside Community Involvement, Inc., 4736 Avenue B
 Arlington Christian Academy Inc., 5606 Windermere Drive
 La Petite Academy, 800 Girvin Road
 La Petite Academy, 9220 Golfside Drive

has helped pay for the program; it contributed \$3.7 million this year. Also, the city's Jacksonville Journey anti-crime initiative provided \$1.5 million for the 2008-09 year to bring the Guiding Stars program to 25 centers in higher-crime areas.

Peyton recognizes education as a key component to public safety. He said he can't envision a scenario when he would back off on funding Guiding Stars.

One of the eight new centers to receive a five-star is A Bright Beginning Child Care on Baymeadows Road. Owner Tracy Bigham said she had many sleepless nights in December, when the final assessment took place. But by last week, when she officially knew, she wasn't surprised.

"I was very anxious," Bigham said, "but I was confident in it, too."

It's what she has worked for since she opened her second center two years ago. She knew it was her calling when she had her oldest child, son Gary, now 16.

"I would drive all over for my child but couldn't find a place," Bigham said. "It took me to have kids in order to realize that quality child-care centers were needed out there."

So after staying at home for a while with her son and then a stint in corporate marketing, Bigham opened her first center about five years ago.

When she heard about the Guiding Stars program, she knew she wanted to be a part of it.

Though she has a bachelor's degree in mass communication and an associate's degree in early childhood education, she relied on the coaches from Episcopal Children's Services, a not-for-profit agency. The coaches visited for a few hours every week for two years to help teach her and her staff how best to handle their 180 students. (Coaches from the Jacksonville Children's Commission also visit some of the centers.)

The coaches taught how to teach the children - everything from the sounds of the alphabet to how to recognize and write compound words. Even infants and toddlers in the center learned how to hold a book and identify shapes and colors.

A team leader helped Bigham with larger decisions, such as introducing a new curriculum, and the overall operations of the center. And, like other centers, Bigham received a lot of monetary assistance.

On average, each center receives help valued at about \$43,000. That consists of about \$11,000 in materials and curriculum, \$4,000 in incentives for staff who earn higher educational degrees, \$3,000 in scholarships to help them get training and \$25,000 worth of training by coaches and team leaders.

But the biggest payoff is for the children.

When Imeisha Driskell searched for a child-care center for her oldest daughter, Jonah, three years ago, Driskell depended largely on her gut instinct - and state inspection reports.

Today, the Guiding Stars program has confirmed what Driskell knew - that Kids Point of View on Edgewood Avenue in Northwest Jacksonville is a quality center.

Now Driskell has a new dilemma.

She's searching for the best magnet program in Duval County public schools for Jonah after a visit to various kindergarten classrooms.

"A lot of their curriculum [in the kindergarten classes she visited] are things she's either ... mastered or things they're learning now," Driskell said. "I'm looking for a school with an academic edge on it, because I don't want her to go somewhere and be bored."

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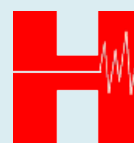
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Family Partners Inc. (Beaches), 353 South Sixth Ave.

First New Zion Christian Academy, 4819 Soutel Drive.

Hopes-N-Dreams Child Care Center, 6689 Arlington Road

Nannys Northside Nursery, 11033 Biscayne Road

True Vine Children's Center, 3519 Post St.

Wayman Early Learning Academy, 1176 Labelle St.

Avondale Child'S Day Out, 1651 Talbot Ave.

Ortega Hills Preschool Inc., 5029 N. Greenway Drive

La Petite Academy, 6601 Argyle Forest Blvd.

2 stars

Great Foundations, 1630 Sandalwood Blvd.

Chappell (FCCJ-North), 4501 Capper Road

Joshua Christian Academy, 924 St. Clair St.

La Petite Academy (Beach Blvd), 13957 Beach Blvd.

Prince & Princess Day School, 2045 Gilmore St.

The Village Christian Academy, 11100 Wingate Road

Lil' Nuggets Day Care II, 7054 Wilson Blvd.

Little Tots Day Care, 6019 Lynwood Ave.

1 star

Parsons Little Scholars, 6505 Fort Caroline Road

Playhouse of Fun & Knowledge Day Care, 5045 Soutel Drive, No. 70

A Little Pre-School, 4504 Sunderland Road

Victoria's Child Care, 3911 N. Main St.

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