As the United Way Center for Excellence in Early Education marks its fifth anniversary, the words of Helen Keller could not be more fitting. The Center stands as a testament that dreams can come true. For our United Way, helping children get off to their best possible start has been a journey 20 years in the making beginning with our Success by 6 initiative that we launched in 1992. With financial support from Bank of America, we initiated a quality enhancement movement in this county. Collectively, we knew we needed to do better by our children – all children. It became unequivocally clear that if we were going to extend the attributes of quality early education, simply tackling one center at a time would not have the community-wide impact our children deserve. Scientific advances in child brain development tell us that the earliest years of life play a critical role in a child’s ability to grow up healthy and ready to learn. Studies show high quality early childhood programs which include well-qualified and well-compensated teachers, research-driven curriculum and assessment and an emphasis on family participation, strengthen the skills a child needs for success in school and life. At the same time, economic research shows quality early education is one of the smartest, most cost-effective investments available. With the purchase of a permanent home for our United Way, thanks to a lead gift from Ed Ansin in memory of his parents Sophie and Sidney Ansin, the board began to focus its attention on the creation of a world-class early childhood teaching and learning center for children and adults alike. And, thus, the seeds for the United Way Center for Excellence in Early Education were planted...
Our first five years

with the ultimate mission of elevating the quality of early care and education, in Miami-Dade and beyond. It took extraordinary vision and courage from our board to embark on this crusade and the participation of dozens of like-minded local and national organizations, early education experts, business and elected leaders, and financial supporters who share a common passion for what is right and just for all children.

Today, the Center serves as a platform for all those in our community and beyond who care about this issue and are committed to changing the system of early care and education for our youngest children, from the day they are born until they enter kindergarten.

Our work is based on three guiding principles:

**Educate** parents and early care professionals on how to become agents of change and improve early childhood education at home and in the classroom;

**Demonstrate** how to improve the quality of services and programs available to young children by serving as a model for observation and implementation of best practices;

**Advocate** for the highest standards in early care and education among business leaders, policy makers and practitioners.

We are grateful to Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd., the Batchelor Foundation, the Michael B. Fernandez Family Foundation and the Knight Foundation, organizations that stepped forward early on with major gifts that allowed us to begin construction of our state-of-the-art facility. They were followed by equally generous gifts from Gerri and Bennett LeBow, Jane Hsiao and Bill O’Dowd.

Our local partners – which include the Early Childhood Initiative Foundation, The Children’s Trust, the Early Learning Coalition of Miami-Dade/Monroe, Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Miami-Dade County, Miami Dade College, Florida International University, University of Miami, among many others – have been with us from the earliest days, long before we put the first shovel in the ground. We have also been blessed to have some of the nation’s leading experts serve on our national advisory board and our local Center committee.

This remarkable collaboration has resulted in leading-edge programming throughout the Center and the community. Many are highlighted on the pages of this five year report. It has also captured the attention and support of educators, foundations and corporations across the nation and international level.

Thanks to our partners at Florida International University, a team of Harvard University professors selected the Center as one of five early learning programs in South Florida to pilot Visible Thinking – a research-based approach to learning that helps children communicate their thought process through pictures.

Fundación Cisneros has partnered with the Center to bring its international flagship visual arts education program, Piensar y Contar, to the early education setting for the first time. In 2008, we were honored when the prestigious Educare Learning Network (formerly known as the Bunting Learning Network) chose our Demonstration School as its seventh Educare center in the country. The invitation to join the Educare network speaks volumes about our shared commitment to excellence.

Since we opened our doors, the Center has played host to delegations from as far away as South Korea and to United Ways from throughout the United States, Canada and Latin America. They’ve come here to observe and learn. Everything from curriculum to the décor is designed to stimulate young minds, and is backed by the latest research. The school also offers parents trainings and other services to help them become their child’s first and most influential teacher.

As 2011 drew to a close, our infant and toddler program was singed out for its innovation and excellence in the federal Head Start review team’s monitoring report and we received accreditation from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Those are just two of the latest accomplishments of our first five years. We’ve achieved a great deal and have so much to be proud of, and yet our work has just begun. Changing our early education system will not happen overnight and will require increased and sustained energy, resources and commitment on all fronts. Our children deserve it; our future – as a community, a nation, a society – hinges on it. We thank you for joining us in this work and for investing in our vision. We’re on our way!

Jayne Harris Abess
Board Chair
United Way of Miami-Dade

Harve A. Mogul
President and CEO
United Way of Miami-Dade

According to Nobel Prize-winning economist, Dr. James Heckman, returns to dollars invested in early education are as high as 15-17 percent per year.
Educare invites the Center to join its national network

In 2008, the United Way Center for Excellence in Early Education Demonstration School earned the proud distinction of becoming the Educare Learning Network’s seventh Educare center in the country. The Educare Learning Network (the network), primarily a partnership between the Ounce of Prevention Fund and the Buffett Childhood Fund, is recognized as the nation’s standard-bearer for high-quality early education and a catalyst for broader early childhood programmatic, policy, and systems change. Today there are 14 centers in this growing network. In addition to the prestige that comes with being part of the network, the Center’s Demonstration School, Educare of Miami-Dade, benefits from technical assistance, peer network school support, access to leading professionals in early childhood development and participation in national studies. Research is also a key component in this relationship. Among the research projects underway at the Demonstration School, Daryl Greenfield, Ph.D., professor of psychology and pediatrics at the University of Miami, conducts assessments on the students and surveys parents to track the progress that children and families are making while factoring in the local environment. Being a part of the network, the Center enhances its value of delivering quality early care and education through sustainable practices.

“It’s been a great partnership because we believe in the same things,” Portia Kennel, executive director, Educare Learning Network, said. “We want quality, effective learning experiences for children, not only in our centers, but for children outside the centers. We also want policy and systems change, and we want to have an impact, nationally.”

Educare of Miami-Dade is somewhat unique from other centers in the network as ours is the only Educare center to have already existed when we joined the network, whereas all other centers were created for the sole purpose of being an Educare center. Likewise, the Demonstration School was the first site to pursue a mixed-income model. Most Educare centers only accept Head Start and Early Head Start students. Since pioneering this mixed-income approach, which includes full-pay students, subsidized students and Head Start and Early Head Start students, the Center has consulted with other Educare sites that are implementing or evaluating the implementation of a similar model.

Further, we have been a leader within the network when it comes to dual language acquisition. Using the reflections of teachers and their documentation of classroom work, school staff has presented its dual language implementation approach at national network meetings. Through these gatherings and exchanges of best practices, via advocacy and the support of shared issues, the Center and the network have established a thriving and mutually beneficial relationship.

“Educare is a better way to do [early education], and it’s starting to become a real national model.”
Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education

Our goal is for all children to succeed – not just at school, but in life.
Susie Buffett, chair, Buffett Early Childhood Fund

Jacqueline Jones, U.S. Department of Education, and Dan Pedersen, Buffett Early Childhood Fund, join United Way board members to dedicate Educare icon
Center brings together diverse advocates in support of high-quality early education policy

Speaking out for those who are just learning to speak is central to the mission of the United Way Center for Excellence in Early Education. Birth to age 5 is a magical time for children when they are just learning to put sounds, words and eventually sentences together. By advocating for the highest quality early care and education, the Center and its supporters work to ensure all children have the best possible start in school and in life.

The Center has brought together champions of early education to speak out on the issues that concern children and their families, and to raise awareness among key audiences, including elected officials and business leaders. Current and past members of Congress, including Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL), Kendrick Meek (D-FL), and Mario Diaz-Balart (R-FL), have visited the Center and hosted members of United Way Women’s Leadership in Washington, D.C. The goal is to increase public awareness and knowledge about the importance of high-quality early childhood care and education, and in turn fuel demand for high-quality early learning opportunities.

Jointly, Congresswomen Wasserman Schultz and Ros-Lehtinen sponsored legislation that resulted in a $300,000 appropriation to the Center. The United Way of Miami-Dade’s Women’s Leadership Council has made a significant commitment to early childhood education advocacy, making this issue the primary focus of the 1,700 women-strong donor group. Between trips to Washington, D.C. in 2007 and 2010 and to Tallahassee in 2008, and calls made and letters written in between, this remarkable group of women have raised their voices in support of access to affordable, quality early care and education and family supports (parenting skills, health insurance, income supports), quality improvements to early education programs, and funds for professional development. Thanks to the efforts of these advocates, and others, members of the 2008-2009 Florida Legislature voted to fully fund T.E.A.C.H., the only state-funded early education teacher development program. This small, discrete funding remains in the State of Florida budget today.

We continue to work with a broad array of partners, particularly The Children’s Trust, Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Birth to Five Policy Alliance and United Way of Florida at the state level and the Educare Learning Network, the First Five Years Fund and United Way Worldwide at the federal level, to champion legislation that supports investments in quality early education. Our joint efforts have promoted the funding of Early Learning Challenge grants to states as well as significant, additional federal investments in early education programs such as Head Start/Early Head Start and high-quality child care for working families.

For the first time, Florida’s 34 local United Ways have joined together with the United Way of Florida to advocate for legislative issues of critical importance to the communities they serve. The Florida United Way Consensus Agenda, a first-ever statewide consensus agenda, represents the unified voice of United Ways in Florida to address their public policy priorities, including high-quality early learning opportunities for Florida’s children. This partnership is a high point in the Center’s advocacy journey over the past five years, and is an ideal launching pad for its continued efforts.

In 2007, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi (above) greets United Way of Miami-Dade advocates; (right) Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL) with Phillis Oeters during advocacy trip in 2010

During an advocacy trip in 2007, Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) meets with Kira Flanzraich and Jayne Harris Abess in her Washington office

“I continue to be so impressed with the work of the Center in elevating the quality of early education, not just in South Florida, but throughout the country.”

Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz

“...I continue to push for improvements to our early education programs...”

Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen

“I continue to be so impressed with the work of the Center in elevating the quality of early education, not just in South Florida, but throughout the country.”

Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz
Center secures coveted federal funding from the U.S. Department of Education and launches innovative Project LEER

Fostering language and literacy skills at an early age can jumpstart a lifetime of learning. In 2009, the United States Department of Education awarded the United Way Center for Excellence in Early Education a three-year, $3.5 million grant for an innovative early reading program designed by the Early Reading First (ERF) team at the Center, Called Literacy Enhancement for Early Readers, or LEER (which means “to read” in Spanish), the program works with teachers and students at the Demonstration School as well as two Miami-Dade County Public Schools (Southside Elementary and Primary Learning Center) and St. Alban’s Child Enrichment Center. Over the course of the three years, 22 teachers and more than 450 students have been the fortunate participants in this model program. “This is my third year working with this amazing project,” Juliana Jafari-Rohani, teacher, Southside Elementary, said. “It is such a pleasure to see how much my students have learned with the strategies and interactive curriculum I was so fortunate to utilize while participating in Project LEER. The resources, professional development, remarkable coaches and outstanding director have given me the opportunity to grow personally and professionally.” Participants in the ERF/Project LEER program receive professional development training from Elena Bodrova, Ph.D., one of the nation’s leading authorities on early childhood education classrooms. Professional development and coaching provides teachers with research-based explicit and intentional instruction which helps to develop children’s oral language, phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge and print awareness. Bodrova provides LEER participants with training in self-regulation and executive function in her Scaffolding Early Literacy (SEL) approach. SEL is designed to help teachers impact the development of language, reading, writing and cognition in preschool-age children. Mature play is an executive function, beneficial to the accomplishment of developmental milestones such as early literacy skills, and is central to the SEL approach. Participating teachers work to scaffold learning by fostering mature levels of play in their classrooms. Meyling Arguello and Maria Caicedo, teachers at the Demonstration School, stated that “we believe mature play enhances children’s learning and leads to new ways of thinking by building connections between prior knowledge and the outside world.”

Program implementation and success is monitored at the classroom and child levels to ensure project goals are met. Results of data collected by participating teachers, ERF/Project LEER literacy specialists, and the University of Miami Mailman Center for Child Development (MCCD-UM) evaluation team, led by Stephanie Scott, Ph.D., and Susan Gold, Ed.D., demonstrate that professional development and coaching have affected instructional practices and student outcomes. Improvements in environments are evident in scores from the Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation tool. Scores increased from 2.45 in fall 2010 to 4.29 in spring 2011. These scores indicate that the early language and literacy practices in Project LEER classrooms have risen to the strong to exemplary range.

At the student level, comparisons of pre and post tests of students going to kindergarten revealed increased scores in all areas monitored by the SEL approach. SEL is designed to help teachers impact the development of language, reading, writing and cognition in preschool-age children. Mature play is an executive function, beneficial to the accomplishment of developmental milestones such as early literacy skills, and is central to the SEL approach.

Opening the World of Learning (OWL) curriculum. The average amount of upper and lowercase letters named increased from 21 to 41. Also, the average percentage of correct responses to phonological awareness and print awareness items increased from 47 percent to 75 percent and 50 percent to 86 percent, respectively. Findings from MCCD-UM support the conclusion that Project LEER is impacting students.

As the federal grant for this program comes to an end in 2012, the Center has partnered with The Children’s Trust to develop a new early reading program, called MAESTRO, based on the lessons learned through Project LEER. MAESTRO is an all-inclusive approach to improving literacy instruction through a dynamic combination of large group training and one-on-one coaching. MAESTRO works with teachers in 15 classrooms and more than 500 students at nine programs that were labeled “low-performing voluntary pre-kindergartens” based on their students’ kindergarten readiness assessment. The goal of MAESTRO is to improve the teachers’ literacy instruction so that the students enter kindergarten ready to learn and achieve long-term academic success.

At the same time, given the importance of early literacy skills, the ERF team is assisting in the development of volunteer trainings, recommended reading lists and literacy extending activities for United Way of Miami-Dade’s Read Together/Leer Juntos program, which deploys volunteer readers in early childhood education classrooms across Miami-Dade.

Elena Bodrova, Ph.D., speaks at a training with Gladys Montes, vice president of the Center

“ It is a very easy link in my mind between pre-K education and the ultimate health of the economy.”

Dennis Lockhart, president and CEO, Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta
A n art museum may be an unlikely place for preschoolers, and yet over the summer of 2008, a group of pint-sized critics ventured to the Miami Art Museum to view the work of Carlos Cruz-Diez. The students, ages 3 to 5 years old, were already familiar with the artist’s work, having discussed one of his murals, Proyecto, in class. They are among 68 preschoolers at the Center’s Demonstration School, Educate of Miami-Dade, participating in an innovative visual arts education program known as Piensa en Arte/Think Art.

A collaboration between Fundación Cisneros and the Center, which began in September of 2008, the program helps develop students’ critical thinking and problem-solving skills through the exploration of art. Teachers trained in the approach conduct carefully guided conversations that, although generated from works of art, are not recognized immediately as being linked to them. Piensa en Arte/Think Art is an art-in-education platform based on the premise that the inherent dialogue between a work of art and its viewer provides a perfect model for interactive and democratic learning. The initiative supports teachers and other educators in focusing on works of art as a means of developing students’ crucial problem-solving skills and other higher-order thinking skills.

“The process of investigating, questioning and creating helps expand a child’s capacity to learn,” Gladys Montes, vice president, United Way Center for Excellence in Early Education, said. “We have been impressed by the responses generated by students, their thread of inquiry, and their ability to make connections and detailed observations.”

The Center first introduced Piensa en Arte/Think Art to a small group of preschoolers at the school in 2007. Since then, the program has expanded and is now part of the curriculum in all four preschool classrooms. At least once a week, teachers set aside a block of time to introduce a new Piensa en Arte/Think Art concept. A recent lesson involved a discussion on how to communicate without words. Children were encouraged to explore wordless picture books and find meaning though interpreting illustrations. They discussed what the author might be trying to communicate through the book, much in the same way an artist would try to communicate through a painting. (See teachers’ documentation on page 7.) A lead teacher in each classroom guides the discussion with students under the supervision of a master teacher, who later provides feedback and guidance. Teams meet once a week to discuss progress and brainstorm future lessons. This process is recorded and analyzed by the teaching team and the master teacher.

Fundación Cisneros is collaborating with early childhood specialists at the Center to expand the program into additional early education centers across the country. In connection with this initiative, the Center is designing and writing age-appropriate Piensa en Arte/Think Art didactic materials. Following the completion of these materials, the Center will host workshops to train teachers, parents and other educators on how to conduct lessons.

Although the work at the Center is the first time Piensa en Arte/Think Art has been introduced in the early education setting, the program has been implemented in elementary schools in Argentina, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Mexico, Venezuela and the United States. The program relies primarily on artworks from the Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, an extensive collection that focuses on modern and contemporary art from Latin America.

Another way students at the Demonstration School are exposed to art is through a three-year partnership with the Miami Art Museum. Once a month, Kerry Keller, the museum’s curator for outreach programs, and her staff visit the Demonstration School and introduce the students to story books related to art and art concepts.

Art encourages kids to think in many different ways. Through art, a child’s social, verbal, written and cognitive abilities are further enhanced.

Carolina, Adriana and Guillermo Cisneros with William Phelan at the Center

Center partners with Fundación Cisneros to deliver Piensa en Arte/Think Art curriculum

July 2007

Center receives grant from the Early Learning Coalition of Miami-Dade/ Monroe to provide countywide training to early childcare providers.

September 2007

74 early childhood program administrators participate in first cohort of ECPAI.

October 2007

Advocates travel to Washington, D.C. to meet with South Florida’s Congressional delegation and other elected leaders.

Carolina, Adriana and Guillermo Cisneros, Fundación Cisneros
Demonstration School teacher Melissa Bittel and co-teacher Paola Bonilla utilize Piensa en Arte/Think Art in their pre-school classroom to develop the thinking skills of each child. Their documentation below illustrates the implementation of Piensa en Arte/Think Art practices in a classroom setting and how children analyze an art piece and, as a result, expand their knowledge base.

**Work of Art: Composición constructiva 16** ([Constructive Composition 16], 1943), by Joaquin Torres-García

Preschool classroom: Alessia, Ana, Carlos, Dayana, Dylan, Giovanni, Heaven, Jacob, Luca, Lucas A., Lucas C., Lucy, Manuel, Mason, Matías, Noa, Vanessa

**The Intention**

Piensa en Arte/Think Art begins not with the work of art, but with exercises and discussions intended to engage our students in thinking about various ways to solve a specific problem. This first step helps to raise our students’ awareness of their innate problem-solving skills and to develop those abilities. It also demonstrates that a single problem may be solved in a multitude of ways, and that there is not necessarily a “right” or “wrong” solution.

1. **Choosing a problem to solve**

   Throughout the school year, we have pursued different ways of encouraging our students to communicate their thoughts, desires, and opinions, and develop problem-solving skills while carefully considering their current language abilities. With this in mind, we chose to introduce the problem “How do we communicate without words?” in order to further develop their critical and creative thinking skills.

2. **Implementation**

   As we formulated exercises focusing on problem solving to introduce to our class, we recognized that the order in which we introduced these exercises was as crucial as the intentionality behind the exercises themselves. Our main goal with the series of provocations was to tie them into already established routines, ensure that the activities fit into the classroom environment as seamlessly as possible, and deepen the children’s understanding of the idea of problem solving.

3. **Selecting the work of art**

   After selecting the painting, we observed and discussed the work with our coworkers. We thought about connections between the work, Egyptian hieroglyphics, and storytelling. After reading that the artist published his own artistic theory, Constructive Universalism, which combined pre-Columbian elements, and geometric principles with the hopes of creating a pictorial language that would be timeless and universal, we thought that the symbols in the work would encourage the children to come up with different interpretations and storylines.

4. **Conducting Exercises**

   **Exercises I: Wordless book exercise**

   Our intention was to present a wordless picture book so that the children would make connections with the concept of reading even though they saw few, if any words, on the pages.

   - **Lucas A.:** “Why aren’t you reading?”
   - **Melissa:** “That’s a good question.”
   - **Lucas A.:** “Where are all the words?”
   - **Melissa:** “I don’t know. Where do you think?”
   - **Lucas A.:** “Maybe the author got tired and didn’t want to write words.”

   **Exercises II: Receiving nonverbal instructions**

   “The Quiet Game” was first implemented during lunchtime, where we used gestures to demonstrate each child’s role in setting the table. When Lucy was handed the stack of plates, she looked at Paola, and then me. I mimicked holding a plate in my hands, and gestured as if I were putting it on top of a placemat. Lucy then slowly picked up the stack of plates and set one on top of a placemat. She looked back at me for another cue and I nodded, so she continued around the table. The initial success in students’ problem solving during “The Quiet Game” led us to provide nonverbal instructions throughout other aspects of our daily routine. Although the children were only told that the instructions would not be spoken, it was fascinating to watch them as they advanced from verbally questioning our instructions to using nonverbal communication such as painting and gestures. We then thought that in order to build on their understanding of the variety of ways we can communicate without using words, we would ask them to take on the role of being the communicators.

   **Exercises III: Expressing and acting out**

   The students actively participated in solving the problem of communicating emotions through facial expressions while their peers guessed what they were attempting to communicate. This exercise transformed as the students expressed their desires to communicate more complex concepts, such as actions, objects, and animals.

   **Initial reflections**

   By implementing exercises that encouraged interpreting images and following and providing nonverbal cues and messages, communicating without words has become second nature in our classroom. The exercises we chose enabled the students to decode nonverbal communications with great ease, and inspired them to move from comprehending to trying their skills in communicating nonverbally with each another.

   As we progressed with our intentionally planned problem-solving exercises, we realized how often we unintentionally incorporate nonverbal communication in the classroom. During a “stop, drop and roll” safety demonstration, we inadvertently added gestures when introducing the verbal three-step instructions. When the children were encouraged to take their turns demonstrating safety tips, we realized that they were adding their own gestures, not additional words, to improve their demonstration skills. We believe we have set the perfect stage for introducing the way Joaquin Torres-García not only communicates many things through his work of art, but also how he chose to resolve the problem of communicating through his unique language that he invented which would be universally understood.

   **Thinking ahead**

   We have slowly integrated the concept of problem solving through communicating without words into our classroom with meaningful learning experiences that develop students’ creative and critical thinking skills. As we noticed the class taking ownership of the exercises, we continued to support them in their learning by providing additional activities to extend their opportunities for growth. The entire process of incorporating multiple ways of solving the problem, “How do we communicate without words?” has substantially improved the students’ abilities in working together, accepting different opinions, and self-regulating. We carefully observed that the process of nonverbal communication was having positive effects in the classroom that we did not foresee.

   We plan to continue working with the students by expanding on the foundation they have built regarding their understanding of communicating without words before introducing the work of art by Joaquin Torres-García so that when they discuss it, they will have become very accustomed to developing multiple interpretations.
Experience the Music program demonstrates connection between developmental gains and music

Traveling through Europe in the 19th century, American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote “music is the universal language of mankind.” While Wadsworth discovered the power of music to transcend cultural barriers, he was not privy to the profound effects music has on children specifically. Research in recent decades shows how sound, rhythm and music can enhance the development of a child’s language, physical coordination, emotional skills, and creativity. Given those remarkable benefits, the United Way Center for Excellence in Early Education Demonstration School, Educare of Miami-Dade, partnered with the University of Miami Frost School of Music to implement and model a music program specifically tailored to the early years.

The Center’s Demonstration School was one of three schools involved in a three-year study from 2009 to 2011 conducted by Joy Galliford, Ph.D., of the University of Miami Frost School of Music. The UM Infant and Toddler Curriculum Project examined the effect of an age-appropriate music curriculum on six outcome measures: large muscle, small muscle, cognitive thinking, expressive language, socio-emotional, and self-help skills as measured by the Preschool Evaluation Scale School Version (Hawthorne, 1992). The sample of participants were preschool children ages infants to 35 months. In addition to the Demonstration School, children from Sagrada Familia Childcare Center and Our Little Ones Childcare Center took part in the study. The study used a curriculum developed by Galliford and her colleague, Joyce Jordan, Ph.D., titled Experience the Music. It incorporates singing, focused listening, movement and the playing of rhythm instruments. Teachers are trained in the curriculum, which involves four units of five-week lesson plans. Additionally, parents receive an Experience the Music CD and participate in weekly homework activities. The idea is for music to become an integral part of the child’s life both in school and at home. Children were given a pre-test at the start of the program, and a post test at the conclusion.

“I have been implementing the Experience the Music curriculum in my classroom for the past three years and it has been an amazing experience for us as a team and more importantly for the children,” Guenline Sanon, a teacher at the Demonstration School, explained. “The children’s language developments have expanded dramatically and the music plays a major part in that.”

In each of the three years of the program, participants were divided into two groups – a treatment group and a control group. Students in the treatment group were exposed to the Experience the Music program and students in the control group were not. Pre and post tests demonstrated that children in the treatment group showed significant growth in large muscle, small muscle, expressive language, cognitive, socio-emotional and self-help skills compared to the control group.

Based on the results of the UM Infant and Toddler Curriculum Project, the Center is working to expand the program. Future plans include identifying a funding source for continued study of the program’s effectiveness, a conference bringing together early childhood educators, and unveiling an online course.

“All the research shows that if you want to make the biggest difference in children’s lives, you get them early and invest heavily in the quality of their education.”

Donna Shalala, Ph.D., president, University of Miami

**Experience the Music program demonstrates connection between developmental gains and music**
Few people think about the ways in which we actually think. But that’s the premise behind Visible Thinking, an approach to learning developed by educators at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Education. It is a teaching tool, created from over 30 years of research at Harvard University. The result is the enrichment of the current education system, departing from the idea of teaching for a test and instead, teaching how to think. This curriculum enhancement provides children with a sustainable way of thinking that can be used throughout their academic careers, empowering them to be confident in their problem-solving abilities. This forward-thinking teaching methodology is currently implemented in public and private schools across the United States.

“As educators, we can work to make thinking much more visible than it usually is in classrooms,” wrote David Perkins, Ph.D., senior professor of education, Harvard Graduate School of Education, and one of the creators of Visible Thinking. “When we do so, we are giving students more to build on and learn from. By making the dancers visible, we are making it much easier to learn to dance.”

The United Way Center for Excellence in Early Education was first introduced to Visible Thinking through Visible Thinking South Florida - Action Research Group which emanated from a class at Florida International University. The professor, Dr. Angela Salmon, introduced the concepts of Teaching for Understanding and Visible Thinking to future early childhood educators. This group of educators attended the Project Zero summer institute at Harvard University in 2007. At the time, Visible Thinking had not been implemented in the early childhood classrooms, and while attending Project Zero, the educators recognized that they were pioneers in the early education field for this approach. When founding members of Visible Thinking Miami came to work at the Center, they brought their newly learned skills into their classrooms at the Center’s Demonstration School, Educare of Miami-Dade.

In 2008, the Center hosted the first Visible Thinking South Florida conference and welcomed David Perkins, Ph.D. Dr. Perkins returned to Miami, along with his Harvard University colleagues, Shari Tishman, Ph.D. and Ron Ritchhart, Ph.D., for a subsequent conference at FIU. What began as a small action research group has now expanded to six centers in South Florida collaborating about Visible Thinking routines under the guidance of the Harvard researchers.

Today, each classroom at the Demonstration School uses Visible Thinking concepts to document and analyze children’s learning. For example, recently teachers initiated an inquiry process with students through concentrating on the power of observation and looking at living objects surrounding the school during “nature walks” (see photos above). The children observed the plants’ interactions with snails, ants, lizards, earthworms, bees, butterflies and birds. Teachers encouraged the children to start looking for areas that they wanted to learn more about. Following the children’s interests, the class continued their ongoing investigation about ecosystems.

According to educators, children who use Visible Thinking as a framework are able to understand concepts, as opposed to simply memorizing them. They must create, process, see, express, believe, imagine and observe each encounter they have with their environment.
Practitioners gain much-needed access to an array of professional development opportunities at the Center

When Karla Moreno became a preschool teacher at the United Way Center for Excellence in Early Education Demonstration School, Educare of Miami-Dade in 2007, she had three years as a classroom assistant under her belt, and had recently earned a bachelor's degree in early childhood development. What Moreno did not realize was that as a teacher at the Center, she would learn as much as she would teach.

"Through the Center, I have been offered a wide range of training opportunities," Moreno explained. "As someone who is passionate about early childhood education, I have been blessed to not only meet leading experts in the field, but to participate in programs which have greatly expanded my skills and teaching techniques."

A year after starting at the Center, Moreno was encouraged to apply to the University of Florida's Teacher Leadership for School Improvement (TLSI), an award-winning program empowering teachers to transform communities. This collaboration between Ready Schools Miami and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, accepted Moreno into its program free of charge. In three years, she earned a master’s degree from UF in curriculum and instruction. Moreno currently works as a master teacher at the Center and serves as a community trainer.

Professional development opportunities like those Moreno has received are at the heart of the Center's mission to improve the quality of early education for all children. When the Center opened five years ago there was no formalized system of training for early education practitioners in Miami-Dade County. From the very beginning, it was clear that in order to make a real and lasting difference in the lives of children, the Center needed to be a place where early childhood professionals, operators, parents and others could gather to learn best practices — and in turn, share those lessons in their own schools, homes and communities.

Of the 5,000 adults trained each year at the Center, nearly 3,000 are early childhood professionals participating in instructional opportunities. The training options at the Center are a menu of needed interventions — a well-informed approach that is delivered live and via technology. Topics vary and incorporate best practices in curriculum, assessment and family/child engagement. To further enhance the offerings,

specialized trainers are flown in from around the country to provide quality instruction for early care professionals. Finally, many sessions are offered in both English and Spanish and delivered at locations across Miami-Dade County, improving access to local practitioners.

Our flagship professional development program, the Early Childhood Program Administrator Institute (ECPAI), offers early childhood program administrators the opportunity to further their knowledge of current philosophies, build capacity in the area of leadership, and receive higher credentials through a series of college-level courses and mentoring.

Since ECPAI’s launch, a total of 371 directors, owners and administrators have graduated from the program, impacting 368 programs across Miami-Dade County. According to pre and post tests, ECPAI graduates increased their knowledge of early childhood education fundamentals by 80 percent or more. In Miami-Dade, one out of every eight early childhood directors/administrators has attended ECPAI.

Timika Saunders, an administrator at Little Hands of Love, an early education center in Florida City, completed ECPAI in 2011. Through her coursework, she learned new ways to lead her staff and become a more effective manager. Saunders also benefited from the mentoring component as she was paired with Helene Layne, president of ETV Web Marketing, Inc.

"Helene visited my center and helped me make adjustments that I didn’t realize we needed," Saunders said. "By going through ECPAI, children and parents have a much more professional staff that is more open to them and they have a better quality of a director."

The courses’ curricula are developed by a team from both the Center and Miami Dade College, and are taught by adjunct professors. Eligible early care professionals attending the program receive a full scholarship funded through a partnership with The Children’s Trust and The Early Childhood Initiative Foundation. Upon completion of the courses, the ECPAI participants receive nine college credits that are required in order to obtain the Florida Advanced-Level Child Care and Education Administrator Credential and can be applied toward eligibility for the Program Administrators Certificate from Miami Dade College.

"The Center has gained such a national reputation for being this hub for professional development for the early childhood community."

Paula Jorde Bloom, professor of early childhood education at National-Louis University

Master teacher Karla Moreno encourages her students to learn and explore
Babies are born ready and eager to learn. And every experience they have from the day they enter this world shapes who they are and how they develop. Building nurturing relationships with infants and their families is essential for their well-being and lays the groundwork for later learning.

At the United Way Center for Excellence in Early Education Demonstration School, Educare of Miami-Dade, the infant/toddler program emphasizes continuity of care from the very start. In each infant classroom, building relationships based on trust is carried out through the concept of “families.” A “family” is comprised of an infant group, a toddler 1 group (12 to 24 months old), a toddler 2 group (24 to 36 months old) and a preschool class. A child has the same caregiver for his/her first three years and that caregiver only works with three children. That individualized attention allows the child and caregiver to develop a strong bond that facilitates the child’s development. Together, the “family” advances through the four stages and children remain in their “family” until they move out of the program.

Research shows that infants that have secured attachment relationships are more likely to explore, play and interact with others. Through positive interactions provided to infants in their classroom, they develop a sense of security, happiness and self-confidence.

In addition, Creative Curriculum® – the curriculum of choice for the infant/toddler program – is an effective tool for achieving the best standards in a high-quality early childhood program. It uses a framework in which caregivers are the foundation of the curriculum and play a central role in nurturing relationships among caregivers/teachers, children and families. The curriculum uses a daily schedule and routine to give infants and toddlers a feeling of consistency. It promotes creative activities, pretend play, reading and alone play as well as group time. These teaching practices are utilized to strengthen the relationship each child shares with staff members and other children in their own family.
Dubbed the “Gateway to the Americas,” Miami has a rich cultural and ethnic diversity. Set against this backdrop, the United Way Center for Excellence in Early Education is in an ideal position to support and celebrate multilingualism.

From the very beginning, the Center has worked with parents, early care and education professionals and community leaders to promote dual language acquisition — the learning of two or more languages — in homes and centers across the country. In addition to monthly trainings and workshops, the Center’s Demonstration School, Educare of Miami-Dade, incorporates research-based dual language teaching strategies with 116 children, ages 8 weeks to 5 years old, enrolled at the school.

Given the link between language, learning and literacy, research shows language development is a critical component to school readiness. Furthermore, the benefits of young children learning two or more languages are well documented. Studies indicate children who know more than one language have personal, social, cognitive and economic advantages throughout their lives. Children who are proficient in their home language are able “to establish a strong cultural identity, to develop and sustain strong ties with their immediate and extended families, and to thrive in a global, multilingual world” (2006 Espinosa, L.M./as cited in Dual Language Learning: What Does it Take? Head Start Dual Language Report; Feb. 2008).

Parents and educators may recognize the significant benefits of maintaining and supporting a child’s first language, while at the same time encouraging the acquisition of a second language. Yet, building those skills requires innovative practices, targeted resources, and community support. Working with researchers at the University of Miami, led by Mileidis Gort, Ed.D., professor of education, the Center guides parents, professionals and others on how best to introduce and implement dual language principles.

The dual language model implemented with children at the Demonstration School is based on scientifically backed research on how children acquire language. Each classroom is staffed by at least two teachers, one of whom speaks to students only in English, while the other speaks only in Spanish. However, it is important to note, lessons are not taught simultaneously in both languages. The language spoken depends on which teacher happens to be giving that part of the lesson, and can switch at any time.

“For instance, if the English teacher is giving her lesson she’ll do everything in English, and if the other teacher intervenes she will give her portion of the lesson in Spanish,” explains Paula Moujalli, director of the Demonstration School. “We have 116 children enrolled in the school and all of them are exposed to both languages every day. The goal is for each student to leave our school and enter kindergarten being fluent in English and Spanish.”

Ongoing professional development is a key component of the dual language program. University of Miami researchers provide the Demonstration School’s teaching staff with coaching, assessments and feedback. Researchers visit classrooms on teacher planning days to discuss the program and answer questions from teachers.

By increasing community outreach, professional development opportunities and raising awareness about the importance of dual language acquisition, the Center is working to ensure children will be better prepared to meet the challenges in school and in a global society.
The selection of an early learning center can be a daunting task for any parent. Fortunately, parents can take some comfort in knowing there are a number of accreditation systems which serve as an indication of whether the program meets high standards. The number of accredited centers in any community is also a good measure of where a community stands in terms of offering quality programs for all children.

The Center’s Demonstration School is proud to have earned accreditation from two leading national accrediting bodies – the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Accredited Professional Preschool Learning Environment (APPLE) – and the top 5-star rating from Quality Counts, which is a partnership among The Children’s Trust, the Early Learning Coalition of Miami-Dade/Monroe, the Early Childhood Initiative Foundation and Ready Schools Miami.

In order to obtain accreditation by a child care accrediting organization, applicants must meet higher standards than licensing regulations. An accredited program offers high-quality care, attention and educational activities and experiences that will aid in a child’s growth and development while simultaneously preparing the child for school. The process begins with program staff rating their center’s strengths and weaknesses. Then, a professional child care expert observes the program, and finally, the program is reviewed. Items reviewed by observers vary, some examples are: curriculum offered, relationships between staff and parents; health and safety standards followed; staff training; and the overall program environment. After review, the early education program gets feedback on how they match up to the accrediting organization’s expectations and standards.

While at the same time earning its own accreditations, the Center is working to help increase the number of accredited early learning centers in Miami-Dade and across the county by encouraging administrators to prepare and apply for accreditation. Thanks to a grant provided by the Early Learning Coalition of Miami-Dade/Monroe, the Center partnered with Family Central, Inc. and the University of Miami Mailman Center for Child Development to assist over 30 early childhood centers and family childcare homes receive accreditation. Through this collaborative effort, the Center mentored 12 early childhood centers through the process.

APPLE is a voluntary accreditation program with a two-step accreditation process. A self-study is followed by a verification visit, which is an evaluation of the indicators of quality in each individual program. All components of a program are examined, including the following: administration, classroom environment, parent and community involvement, advocacy on behalf of children and child care, staffing credentials, staff-child ratios, teacher-child interaction, and literacy and curriculum.

NAEYC has offered a national, voluntary accreditation system to set professional standards for early childhood education programs since 1985 — and has come to define quality in early education. Today, more than 7,000 child care programs, preschools, early learning centers, and other center- or school-based early childhood education programs in the United States are currently NAEYC-accredited, including 81 in Miami-Dade County.

Quality Counts is a voluntary rating system that reviews early learning programs according to clearly defined, high quality standards using a 5-star method of evaluation and offers supports and incentives to help providers reach their goals.

As a NAEYC-accredited program, the Center embodies quality with its emphasis on solid and meaningful relationships with each child, their family, and the caregivers.

Luis A. Hernandez, early childhood education specialist, Western Kentucky University
By the spring of 2011, Katrina Rolle was in desperate need of help. She was homeless, using drugs, and pregnant. Fortunately for Rolle, she received the help she needed when it mattered most.

Through a referral from the Lotus House, a resource center and residential facility serving homeless women and infants in the heart of Miami's Overtown district, a historically African-American neighborhood, Rolle was connected with the early Head Start Home-Based Program. She then met Jacqueline Santos, a home-based educator with the United Way Center for Excellence in Early Education who became her source of guidance and support. Santos provided Rolle with important prenatal information, including pregnancy classes on the benefits of good nutrition, car seat safety, ways to relieve stress and more.

Once her son was born, Rolle continued to grow as a new mother through individualized and group socializations. Today, she is happier and healthier, drug free and no longer homeless. She serves as a mentor to other mothers facing similar circumstances.

“Home visiting has helped many low-income families to strengthen their family, develop work skills and find employment, improve their family’s health and children’s development and enhance overall well-being. The Center has an impressive history of providing exemplary services for young children and their families and improving our communities,” Mimi Graham, Ph.D., Florida State University Center for Prevention and Early Intervention policy director, said.

The Early Head Start Home-Based Program, launched in April 2010, is one of Head Start’s comprehensive program options designed to meet the needs of low-income pregnant women and families of infants and toddlers through home visits and group socializations. After two years as a Head Start/Early Head Start provider, the Center’s Demonstration School, Educare of Miami-Dade, received funding for eight home-based Early Head Start slots. Consistent with its innovative approach to education and child-centric philosophy, the Center decided to allocate these dollars to serve a hard-to-reach, high-need population – Miami-Dade’s homeless. The families currently participating in the program were selected through a partnership with the Lotus House Women’s Shelter.

To date, 12 families have received an array of individualized services based on each family’s situation. The home-based program’s principal goal is to support parents in their role as their child’s “primary teacher” in promoting their overall development and offering a safe environment in which to learn and grow. Both the parent and educator work collaboratively to develop a curriculum that will establish realistic goals for the infant or toddler each year and help him/her to transition to a Head Start Center-Based program. The program is two-fold: weekly year-round 90-minute home visits to support parents in educating and nurturing their children (as well as their own educational opportunities) and biweekly group socialization to strengthen and support parents. Home-based educators also provide additional support to families experiencing multiple stressors, including postpartum depression, violence in the home, health complications or other family crises. Beyond the emotional support offered by the program, participants receive assistance with basic resources such as clothes, food, transportation, strollers, car seats and educational supplies.

At-risk children who do not receive quality early care and education are 25 percent more likely to drop out of school, 40 percent more likely to become a teen parent, 50 percent more likely to be placed in special education classes, and 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime.
Family engagement team builds bonds to improve children's lives at home and at school

From the first phone call a parent receives about their child’s acceptance into the United Way Center for Excellence in Early Education Demonstration School, Educare of Miami-Dade, the family engagement staff involves the whole family in their new learning environment. The family engagement staff’s role within the Demonstration School takes many forms, but primarily focuses on promoting and enhancing the parent-child relationship. Staff works with families in both English and Spanish and is sensitive to the myriad cultures and special needs that comprise our student body.

“What I love is the tools that I am receiving. Being a mom with seven kids, there’s a lot of things that I’m learning here and I love the new approaches,” Maria Hickein, a parent of a child at the Center, said.

By intentionally creating a system that supports the child through three guiding principles: (1) fostering the parent-child relationship; (2) providing parents with information about growth and development; and (3) encouraging parent involvement in their child’s school; parents are equipped to be their child’s first educational advocate. The staff provides parents with tools and resources they can use to promote their child’s learning at home and in school and to become stronger advocates for their children. Through activities, practices and services that support families as their child’s first teachers, the staff promotes the child’s learning, development and successful family life.

One of the events that encourage parental involvement is the parent roundtable — a meeting with parents from a designated classroom, the teachers and a member of the family engagement team. The roundtable gives parents the opportunity to voice their ideas and opinions with other parents, as well as to receive support from other parents who may be facing the same challenges. Beyond the support that the roundtable model offers to parents, the sessions are a way for parents to earn their volunteer hours. The 30 volunteer hours required of each family creates an ideal opportunity to build the home-school connection.

In the classroom, family engagement staff members observe children in their school environment. This observation affords the family engagement team the opportunity to provide actionable information to the parents. In addition, the staff applies a strategy received from the Educare Learning Network called Brazelton’s “Touchpoints,” a tool that guides the strengthening of the parent-child relationship by helping parents understand children’s growth patterns, create a common language with their children, and engage with their children’s care providers and more.

The family engagement team bridges the gap between teachers, the administrative staff, and parents by building relationships with families while also creating lifelong education advocates within each parent or caregiver.
In the past five years, the United Way Center for Excellence in Early Education has had the privilege of working alongside key partners who share in this vision and embody the spirit of collaboration. Together, we continue to elevate the quality of early care and education in Miami-Dade and beyond.

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Early childhood education strengthens the entire community and for any business within that community that’s what we need for our future.

Richard Fain, chairman and CEO, Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd.

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The Center has benefited from relationships at national universities:

- **Barry University**: Lilia C. DiBello, Ed.D.
- **Harvard University**: David Perkins, Ph.D.; Ron Ritchhart, Ed.D.; Shari Tishman, Ph.D.
- **Florida International University Visible Thinking, Miami Project**: Angela Salmon, Ed.D.
- **Florida State University**: Mimi Graham, Ed.D.
- **Miami Dade College**: Susan Neimand, Ph.D.
- **Nova Southeastern University**: Wilma Robles de Melendez, Ph.D.; Center for Autism and Related Disabilities
- **University of Miami**: Franklin Porter Graham
- **University of North Carolina**: Daryl Greenfield, Ph.D, College of Arts and Sciences, Department of Psychology; Frost School of Music; Mailman Center; Center for Autism and Related Disabilities
- **University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill**: Donna Bryant, Ph.D., Franklin Porter Graham
- **Western Kentucky University**: Luis Hernandez