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FOREFRONT

DAYCARE'S NEW DEAL

Educare Is Quietly Changing the Face of Early Childhood Education. Can It Also End Cycles of Urban Poverty?



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One rainy morning in Milwaukee, several preschoolers file back into their classroom after an unexpected fire drill. A teacher works to reanimate them through group dances and sing-a-longs to such songs as “If You’re Happy and You Know It.” Then it’s back to business. One cluster of students spells out words that start with ‘W’: Walrus, winter and window. Their less advanced classmates have a somewhat easier task: Identifying images of butterflies, rabbits and other animals during a spirited game of word bingo. “I’m going to have to start making harder words for you, because you are just too smart,” the classroom aide, Janelle Beckmann-Rudolph, tells them. The children have a full schedule that day: Breakfast, teeth brushing, greeting, large group literacy, music and movement, small group literacy, toilet and hand washing, outdoor gross motor, small group math, hand washing again. And that’s all before lunch.

This cheery classroom sits in the middle of Milwaukee’s Metcalfe Park, one of the most economically depressed areas in one of the nation’s [most segregated cities](#). More than 90 percent of the neighborhood’s residents are African American, compared to 39 percent of the city as a whole. The poverty rate is nearly double that of the city (49 percent compared to 27 percent) and the educational attainment is significantly lower (about 55 percent of Metcalfe Park residents haven’t finished high school, compared to 20 percent of Milwaukeeans). Some 60 percent of the toddlers happily singing in the early childhood center, called Educare, live in the neighborhood.

If you are not an expert on early childhood education, you may never have heard of Educare, but in the next five years that is likely to change. Though early childhood centers aren’t typically considered powerful players on the national stage, Educare is steadily becoming a respected name nationwide in both urban and education policy. Over the last decade, [a network of 18 Educare centers](#) across the country has changed the lives of hundreds of low-income families in cities including Milwaukee, Omaha, Seattle and Atlanta. Many of the families had little idea what they were getting into when they signed their children up for the program, which enrolls infants as young as six weeks and keeps them through the age of five.

Educare’s approach combines several different

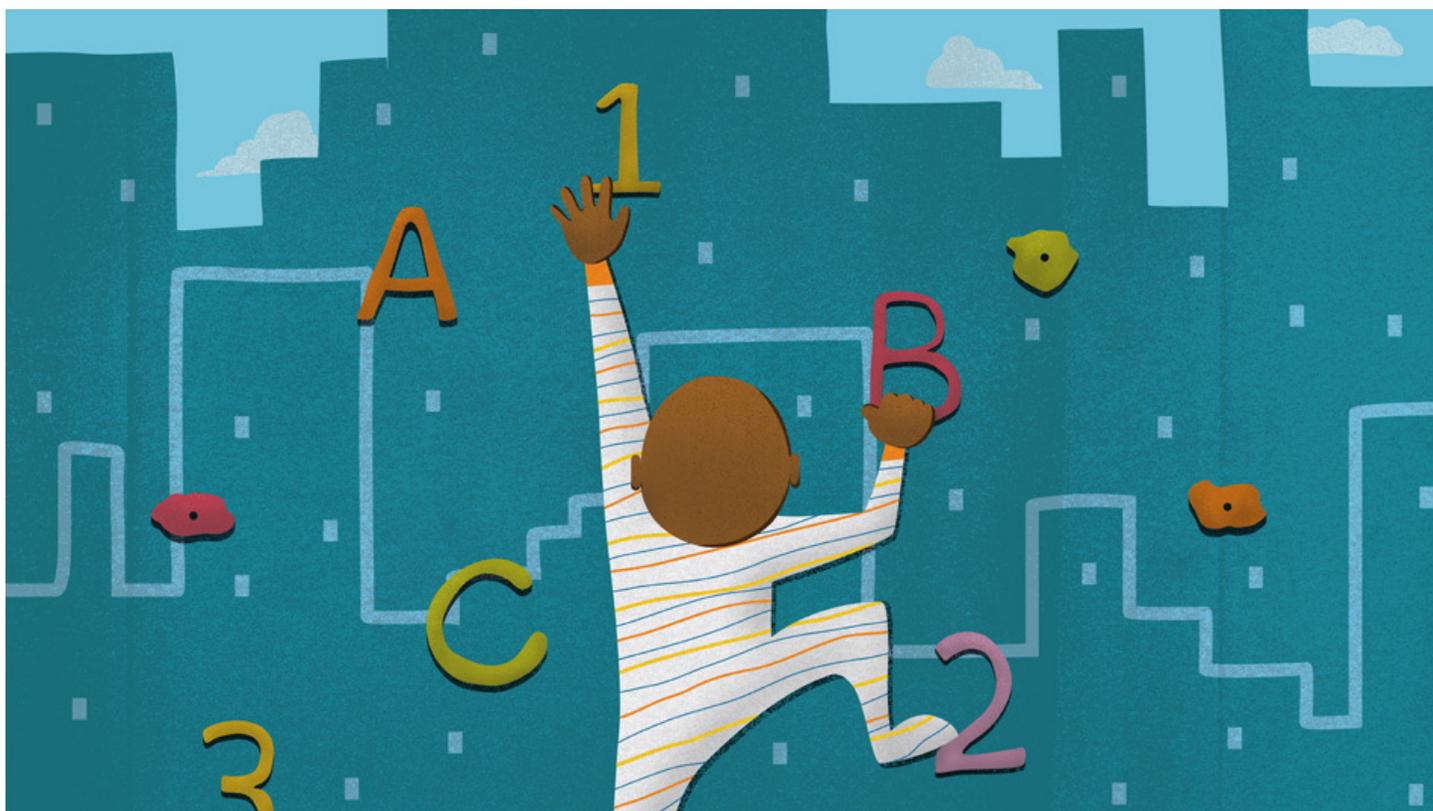
strategies for combating urban poverty: Get the neediest children into high-quality educational settings as early as possible. Provide struggling families with a buffet of social supports that address their educational, health and economic needs. Focus on improving the quality of life and services for those living in a targeted geographic area.

These strategies have attracted fervent and powerful admirers in recent years, including President Obama, who has pushed for universal preschool for low- and middle-income 4-year-olds and whose administration in 2011 [provided federal support](#) to expand the concept behind the wrap-around model that underpins Educare, as well as the perhaps better-known [Harlem Children’s Zone model](#). That children’s zone offers health, education, parenting and other programs to low-income families within an established geographic area.

Despite their popularity, these approaches have failed to gain widespread traction as policy solutions, at least partly because of their cost and complexity. Educare centers spend about \$21,000 per child on average, although that figure can vary considerably depending on the center’s location and available funding sources. So while the Harlem Children’s Zone and Milwaukee’s Educare Center have attracted influential supporters, comparable models have only been tried in a handful of isolated communities, with varying degrees of fidelity and financial backing.

In many respects, Educare’s holistic emphasis and focus on the littlest of learners represents the antithesis of the nation’s current approach to poverty alleviation and urban school reform, epitomized by the welfare-to-work push of 1990s and the standards-based school accountability movement. Like these latter initiatives, America’s most popular and far-reaching social reforms tend to be rooted in a single principle, whether that’s getting welfare recipients into jobs, requiring everyone to have health insurance or evaluating teachers based on their students’ results.

For better or for worse, Educare’s aim cannot so easily be distilled into a lone principle or goal. As families quickly learn, even explaining what Educare has to offer can take some time. The centers might be built on the premise that getting a city’s most vulnerable infants into stable, educationally rich learning environments is the best means of ending



intergenerational poverty in the long run. But in the short run they also aim to transform the lives of those children’s parents, the trajectory of entire neighborhoods and the approach to child care in the communities where they operate.

Educare’s story over the last decade speaks to the promise multipronged efforts hold for turning around struggling city neighborhoods and the paths of some of their most vulnerable residents. It also speaks to the challenges in bringing this kind of complicated approach to scale.

“THEY’RE NOT GOING TO BE ABLE TO GET RID OF ME”

Olivia Christian is one of the parents who send their children to Educare’s Metcalfe Park early childhood center. When she set out to find a daycare program for her three children — ages three, two and one — her goals were modest. She hoped only to find a safe place with hot meals that she could access through public transportation. But at Educare, Christian got much more than she bargained for.

Educare and its partner programs provide not only hot meals and a safe place within walking distance of her apartment. The center also offers low staff-to-

child ratios (no more than three to eight in the infant and toddler rooms and three to 17 in the preschool classes), an ambitious academic program (parents find their children’s verbal skills advance at a fast and furious pace), long hours (Educare is open year-round between 7am and 5:45pm), a support staff that works to involve parents (including required home visits), job and education training for parents (center staff helped Christian find out about job fairs and arranged for her to volunteer in the office to get more work experience), and on-site dental and medical care (especially crucial since two of Christian’s children have sickle cell anemia).

“I first came here to take the kids to the doctor and was like, ‘Hold on, there’s something else in this building,’” said Christian, who removed her children from a nearby daycare center to enroll them at Educare. “The daycare around the corner just fed them breakfast and let them watch cartoons. I’m not leaving Educare for a long time. They’re not going to be able to get rid of me.”

Christian’s luck finding Educare wasn’t completely coincidental. When it comes to admissions, the center prioritizes children with the highest needs first, giving them points in their application if they

are disabled, homeless, in foster care or have an incarcerated parent. This is unusual in an American educational structure where the privileged, powerful and “gifted” usually have access to the best, most richly resourced schools. It’s little wonder many of Educare’s parents — accustomed, like Christian, to subpar child care and decrepit school buildings — are surprised by the depth of resources they find at the centers.

About half of the children have at least one parent who is employed, while the other half live in households supported largely by welfare and food stamps. The center braids together a mixture of public and private funding streams to support its extra staffing, long school day and year, and holistic approach. Specifically, it relies on child care subsidy payments, Head Start and Early Head Start money (federal programs that provide low-income youngsters access to health care and preschool in the years before kindergarten), school district funds for

as “continuity of care,” meaning that the same set of classroom staff stay with the children between the ages of one and three, and another set take over for the preschool years.

Milwaukee mother Shemurath Green said the Educare program stands head and shoulders above the child care where she had previously sent her 4-year-old son, Shemar. At the first center, Green had to supply diapers and food for her son, who still wasn’t talking by the time he approached the age of two.

“I’ve seen a complete change in his developmental skills here,” Green said. “He knows his A, B, Cs, how to count to 20, and he’s potty-trained.”

Lanette Grant, a mother and full-time college student, said her 2-year-old daughter, Essence, comes home each day with a new piece of knowledge under her belt, whether it’s the sounds different animals make or an understanding of how money is used. “She’s more independent, which is good for me because

The first center Essence attended, known as the Lemonade Stand, was “kind of like ghetto daycare. They weren’t teaching them anything.”

its 4-year-olds, and grants from local foundations and individuals, including Peter Buffett, son of billionaire investor Warren Buffett. Usually, between 12 and 15 percent of an Educare center’s budget comes from private sources.

In Milwaukee, the extra money helped support the construction of a state-of-the-art building, located across the street from boarded-up homes and designed specifically with its young denizens in mind: Classrooms feature sunny alcoves filled with books and toys for the children to explore, pint-sized water fountains and faucets built at their level, and an indoor gymnasium. Philanthropic support and the blending of public funds also allow for extra depth in staffing. Each classroom has a lead teacher with at least a bachelor’s degree, an assistant with an associate’s degree and an aide with a high school diploma. (By contrast, most child care centers require 40- to 80-hour certification classes, but no post-secondary degree, even for lead teachers.) Educare also tries to practice what’s known

I have another on the way,” Grant said in an interview last winter. Seven and a half months pregnant, she had already signed her unborn child up for Educare.

Grant refers to Educare as “school,” not child care, because her daughter learns so much. By contrast, the first center Essence attended, known as the Lemonade Stand, was “kind of like ghetto daycare. They weren’t teaching them anything.”

TOXIC STRESS, YOUNG BODIES

Educare was born on the South Side of Chicago in the late 1990s, the confluence of a distinct set of trends. The city was starting to tear down many of its enormous high-rise housing projects, including the Robert Taylor Homes, home to an early childhood program called the Beethoven Project. The ensuing disruption and dislocation exposed the fragility of the community and the dangers for children growing up there. Turf wars erupted as families were forced to move across gang boundaries. The struggling Beethoven

Project attempted to address young children’s needs across multiple dimensions. During the demolitions, Beethoven Project leaders, including Portia Kennel, decided to revive the program in a somewhat altered form — and with a firmer foundation in the science of brain development. “Out of that challenging experience rose a phoenix,” said Kennel, “and that phoenix was Educare.”

At that time, a growing body of neuroscience research underscored the impact that “toxic stress,” felt by even the youngest of children, can have on their entire lives. It affects their ability to bond with others, focus on schoolwork and even sit still. The research suggested that children growing up in extreme poverty (who are more likely to be exposed to toxic stresses like violence or chronic neglect) could benefit disproportionately from calm, stable learning

That same decade, welfare reform pushed thousands of low-income mothers out of the home and into jobs, highlighting the need for affordable, high-quality child care options for poor families.

The first Educare center opened in February of 2000 by Chicago’s [Ounce of Prevention Fund](#), which focuses specifically on expanding early learning opportunities for children living in poverty. The model spread to other cities and states after Warren Buffett’s daughter, Susan, visited the Chicago school and her family embraced the concept, contributing money toward the growing network, particularly in Omaha and Milwaukee. Initially, all Educare centers were based in cities — large and small — but centers have since opened in rural Maine and suburban West DuPage, Ill., and one is scheduled to open soon on a Winnebago Tribe reservation in Nebraska.

“The K-12 people are just beginning to understand the science, that what happens before kids get to kindergarten might be more important than we ever imagined.”

environments where they can bond with trusted adults at a very young age. Much of the research was summarized in a 2000 report titled “[From Neurons to Neighborhoods](#),” which argued that scientists and policymakers alike needed to focus more on early childhood brain development.

Also in the 1990s, results of what’s known as the [Abecedarian Project](#) highlighted the long-term benefits of early childhood education. The project began in the early 1970s in the Chapel Hill-Durham-Raleigh metropolitan region of North Carolina, when infants from poor families were assigned to one of two groups: The treatment group received intensive education services through the age of five, while the control group was left to its own devices. Researchers followed the families for decades. By the mid-1990s, the outcomes suggested that poor children who receive intensive emotional and educational support starting in infancy not only do better in school, but are more likely to attend college and less likely to become teen parents.

Educare has quietly grown even as support for early childhood education and prekindergarten has waned nationally. States spent half a billion dollars less on their preschool programs during the 2011-12 school year than they did the previous year, according to a [spring report](#) from the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University. That’s partly because the recession forced states to slash budgets across the board. But as a strategy for urban school reform, early childhood education has not taken on the prominence of charter schools or evaluating teachers on their students’ test scores, at least not in recent years. Too often, reformers look to the existing K-12 structure to make changes, instead of recognizing that what happens to children in their first few years of life shapes their elementary and secondary education in countless ways.

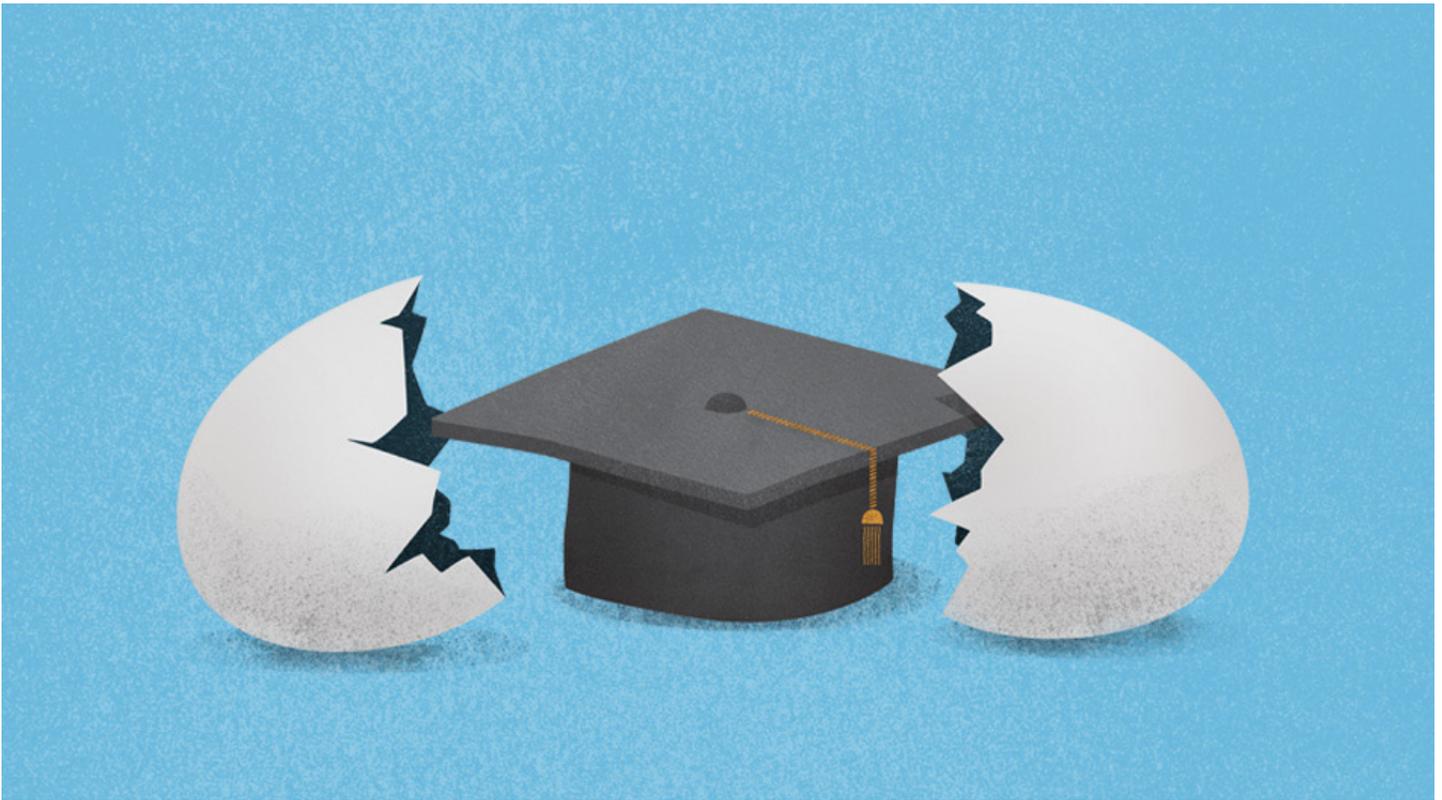
“The K-12 people are just beginning to understand the science, that what happens before kids get to kindergarten might be more important than we ever imagined,” Kennel said.

MINDING THE GAP

Although Milwaukee’s Educare Center has quietly thrived during much of its eight-year history, progress has been slow and uncertain at times. The center has struggled in particular to forge the relationships it needs to implement a truly place-based strategy and to find and retain qualified staff.

Nationally, each Educare center is expected to identify a strategy for spreading its most successful practices outside its walls, as well as to a nearby

quality of interactions between children and teachers to how to strengthen relationships with families. But, by necessity, some of those centers are located outside Metcalfe Park. Meanwhile, Educare still hasn’t established a relationship with a neighborhood elementary school where it can send most of its graduates, mostly because the closest school consistently posts weak results and Educare staff do not feel comfortable recommending it to families. “To really impact the community through education we would have a feeder school for the kids to go to right



elementary school where it can send its graduates. Educare’s Milwaukee leaders had hoped to work in an advisory capacity with several low-rated child care centers in their zip code to maximize impact in Metcalfe Park. But they met some suspicion and distrust. “It was surprising to me that there weren’t people burning up the phones to get in the program,” said Sandy Gadzichowski, one of Educare’s master teachers.

By last school year, Gadzichowski and others had hustled to find about half a dozen cooperative centers, which they advise on everything from the

in the neighborhood,” said Angela Lampkin, Educare’s director in Milwaukee.

It has also taken time to phase in the “continuity of care” model since the Milwaukee Educare had a high rate of staff turnover in its early years. Of the initial six employees working in the 3- and 4-year-old classrooms, only one or two remain. The infant and toddler teachers move up the grade levels with their children, although the center’s leaders hope to introduce that model soon at the preschool level as well. Lampkin says it can be challenging to find fully credentialed teachers who want to work specifically

with young children. Although Educare staff make far more than they would in a typical child care — lead teachers start at \$30,000, compared to \$10 an hour in many child care centers — they make significantly less than they would working for the public school system. And talented workers with an associate’s degree can often find jobs that pay more than the classroom assistant position at an Educare. In the last couple of years the Milwaukee Educare has managed to cut turnover to below the industry average despite these challenges, Lampkin said.

Educare also struggles to make its complex funding structure work without private money, particularly since many federal funding streams were not designed with the lives of poor families in mind. For instance, Educare centers only receive child care subsidy payments if a parent is employed. But many poor women work only sporadically, or bounce from job to job. The program’s goal is to serve the neediest

urban renewal efforts, including mixed-income housing developments, aim to revitalize city neighborhoods by broadening their appeal, not by targeting poorer residents.

Such trends are symptomatic of the nation’s capitalistic approach to policymaking. The assumption is that a rising tide lifts all boats — not that we should focus our energies on those in imminent danger of capsizing. The programs targeted specifically at low-income communities that do exist, such as some charter schools, are rarely premised on the notion that the most vulnerable might need more and better of everything: Money, services, support. Instead, their backers tend to argue the reforms will help by increasing competition, for instance. Or they claim that they can do more with less.

Educare could potentially encourage more imitators if it commissioned a systemic and ambitious study of its results, said Steven Barnett, director of

“We want to do what the science says when it comes to creating a stable early learning environment... But it takes more resources to do what the science says.”

families in as stable an environment as possible, so it would run counter to its core mission to expel the child of a mother who lost her job. Instead, most of the centers use their private funding sources to fill the gap when a parent is out of work.

“We want to do what the science says when it comes to creating a stable early learning environment,” Kennel said. “But it takes more resources to do what the science says.”

ACKNOWLEDGING NEED

Partly for this reason and despite its prominence in a growing number of communities, Educare has failed to inspire many copycat models so far. On the early childhood front, for instance, several states have expanded their K-12 structures to encompass 4-year-olds — adding publicly funded prekindergarten — but very few have developed or expanded programs aimed at the neediest infants and toddlers. Likewise, many

the National Institute for Early Education Research. So far, the most significant studies of the program have been relatively small in scope. The largest found that Educare is relatively effective at preparing children for kindergarten — particularly if the youngsters enter the program by the age of one and stick with it. The [study](#) tracked Educare students at 12 centers between 2007 and 2011, concluding that those who started the program by the age of one achieved, on average, a level of kindergarten readiness very close to the national mean. That’s not an insignificant achievement considering that most children living in poverty are already way behind the national average when they start school.

Barnett said Educare should undertake a long-term, randomized trial similar to the Abecedarian. “Clearly they can’t serve but a tiny fraction of kids,” he said. “I do think Educare can fertilize the whole field, but they have to have some credible randomized

results to do that.” Lampkin said the Milwaukee Center is part of a randomized, five-year study of Educare; early results will be released in 2014.

The program that most closely resembles Educare is Early Head Start, which provides young children and their families with health care and other support. But Early Head Start (which started before Educare) does not include the depth of services that Educare does, particularly when it comes to the education and facilities component. Nationally, it serves only 4 percent of eligible children.

Barnett believes that a more ambitious study of Educare’s success could provide a jumpstart for Early Head Start, encouraging both greater investment in the program and a deepening of its educational component. “If [Educare] can successfully demonstrate this is the model that produces large gains for kids,” he said, “then it can be the model for early Head Start.”

QUANTIFYING OPPORTUNITY

It’s hard, however, to distill Educare’s impact down to a number in the short term. And this puts it at odds with a metrics-obsessed school reform movement and society. Most state standardized testing structures do not encompass 4-year-olds, much less 1-year-olds, and there’s considerable debate about whether they even should. Moreover, many of Educare’s most promising results do not show up in its children — at least not directly.

Educare staff members have helped parents find affordable apartments, alcohol and drug treatment programs, online training, counseling for domestic

violence and jobs. They’ve taken them shopping, created family budgets, talked them into continuing their education and talked them out of despair. This assistance almost always helps the program’s children, but not in ways that can be easily and quickly quantified.

While Educare’s teachers helped Shemar Green learn his numbers and alphabet, for instance, other staff members worked with his mother to polish her resume and hone her interviewing skills. Shemar’s father is in prison, and Green works to raise him and a 1-year-old brother, largely on her own. When she enrolled her children at Educare in 2011, Green supported her family by driving school buses for Milwaukee Public Schools. She hated the job, which was part time and offered no benefits. “It was draining,” she said. “The kids would yell at you and the parents would try to fight you.”

When a job came open at the post office, Green hesitated. But Educare staff encouraged her, pointing out the superior benefits and potential for advancement. Last January, all their hard work paid off when Shemar began to spew out words and the post office hired his mother. Later in the spring, a full-time job driving buses came open at the Next Door Foundation, Educare’s umbrella organization. The position offered full benefits and the opportunity to work for the non-profit she had come to love. She did not think twice about accepting the job. Educare’s water fountains, faucets and bathrooms might be designed with their pint-sized clients in mind. But Green knows that she’s just as central to Educare’s work in Milwaukee as her son.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sarah Carr is the author of *Hope Against Hope: Three Schools, One City, and the Struggle to Educate America's Children*. Her work has been honored with numerous national awards and fellowships, most recently a Spencer Education Journalism Fellowship at Columbia University.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR



Tim Pacific is a Philadelphia-based graphic designer. His work can be seen in AIGA Philadelphia's SPACE, which features a recently completed series of hand-lettered postcards. Among his design philosophies, Tim believes strongly that concept comes first and you should absolutely judge a book by its cover design.