

Baltimore

MAGAZINE

LOYOLA EARLY LEARNING CENTER

GOING TO SCHOOL ON FATHER WATTERS

BY CHRISTIANNA MCCAUSLAND

GABRIELLE AUTRY, 29, wanted her daughter Alyssa to attend preschool. She wanted her to have her own cubby, learn to listen to a teacher, and have classmates. Autry, who has experience as an elementary school paraprofessional helping kids with learning differences, has seen firsthand the importance of a high-quality preschool program.

"In that birth-to-school-age time, I think a lot is lost or could be better reinforced," she explains. "Especially working at an elementary school, I watch the kids who have only been in daycare or at home and how they struggle in the first months of school with attachment issues and crying. I also see kindergarteners who don't even have letter recognition."

Research backs Autry's anecdotal evidence. The most definitive study on the value of early education, the Perry Preschool Project, documented that children who attend high-quality preschools not only learn and behave better, they also live healthier lives and earn more over their lifetimes.

Yet when Autry sought a preschool in her community on Baltimore's west side, options were slim, especially for a full-day program, which Autry needed as a working parent. A friend told her about Loyola Early Learning Center (LELC), a new school opened in 2017 that offered tuition-free scholarships for Baltimore City residents. The program, located in Mount Vernon, is year-round.

"I loved the atmosphere of the school, that it was located in a rich cultural district, and that the building was tailor-made for these little babies," says Autry.

LELC Director Erica Meadows underscores that being a preschool, not a daycare, is an important distinction. "We

expect students to be in school every day, all day. They know we have high expectations for them," she says. "We're creating an environment that is nurturing, positive, and happy, so kids learn to love school and where parents feel valued and respected."

LELC is open to all city residents regardless of faith and, though income is one of three main determinates for a child to receive a scholarship, the average household income for applicants is \$25,000 for a single mother of one. LELC also conducts monthly parent-education seminars covering topics such as health and nutrition and financial literacy, and a family member must give 20 hours of volunteer time and write three letters to their tuition sponsor each year. Tuition is underwritten almost entirely by donors who agree to support a student with \$16,000 per year for three years.

The school is a colorful, joyful space where students receive a healthy breakfast, lunch, and snack. The typical day includes circle time, where kids learn to talk about their feelings and pursue play-based learning and arts and crafts to build fine motor skills. There's a playground and a neighborhood splash zone for hot days. Kids also learn mindfulness techniques and take yoga at a nearby studio, and go on field trips.

While LELC is new, it's backed by longtime successful Jesuit educator and school president Father William Watters. Watters founded the all-boys middle school St. Ignatius Loyola Academy in 1993 for underserved families in the city, then created the coed Cristo Rey Jesuit High School. He was hoping to open an elementary school when he realized the dearth of preschools in the city.

"Many children in the low-income families of Baltimore don't have the opportunity to have their children educated and prepared for kindergarten," says Watters. "We want these children to be fully prepared with their spiritual, emotional, and physical gifts developed so that they are up and ready to pursue education at kindergarten and beyond."

"We want to be with our kids all the way to help them become successful, productive citizens of Baltimore and to have the spirit of giving back so they give back what was given to them," he says, "and they can't do that unless they have a good education."