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Nurtury Learning Lab designed to foster opportunity

Jamaica Plain facility to celebrate launch

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Wayne Ysaguirre, chief executive of Nurtury, stood in the center's art lab, in Jamaica Plain's Bromley-Heath housing development.

By [Jeremy C. Fox](#) GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JUNE 16, 2014

Inside the colorful, sun-splashed rooms of a new learning center in Jamaica Plain's Bromley-Heath public housing development, educators hope to improve lives and communities by tackling issues that mire families in poverty.

The creators of the Nurtury Learning Lab envision a site where children will develop skills as they play among fruit trees and vegetable beds that they have planted; where families will take lessons in turning that produce into healthy, affordable meals; where parents will gain skills for teaching their children at home and advocating for their educational success.

Robert Lewis, 54, who grew up in Bromley-Heath, said the new center already is a source of pride for the community.

"The parents are just as excited as the kids," he said. "I was talking to a couple of parents — [their children are] getting up early; they want to get there an hour early. . . . They're just excited about education and learning new things, and that's really the key to everything."

After a soft opening in mid-May, the facility is set to celebrate Monday at a ceremony with Mayor Martin J. Walsh. In a statement, Walsh praised the learning center as "a great example of a service that will greatly impact children's lives and start them on a path for success."

The \$17.1 million project is a collaboration between the Boston Housing Authority and Nurtury, a 136-year-old child care and education agency known until earlier this year as Associated Early Care and Education.



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The facility is set to open Monday.

Its bright and airy new facility replaces a space in the basement of a nearby residential tower that has served neighborhood preschoolers since 1956, allowing its expansion from 91 children to a planned 175, including a new after-school program for children up to age 8.

With more than 20,000 square feet of classrooms and 14,000 square feet of outdoor learning and play space, the building can also accommodate new

programs for parents and opportunities for early education researchers and students to observe teaching.

“The reason we called it a learning lab is it really was designed as a laboratory for us to learn and for others to learn,” said Wayne Ysaguirre, chief executive of Nurtury.

“It’s important that we serve kids well, but it’s actually important that . . . we practice new things,” Ysaguirre said. “There’s a lot of great information that comes out of research institutions . . . but it takes years before they get to practitioners.”



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The facility includes 14,000 square feet of outdoor learning and play space.

Nurtury is building relationships with Boston University, Wheelock College, and the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University to share expertise and enable research, he said. To help address families' broader needs, Nurtury is working with other social service agencies.

“This partnership strategy that’s part of this learning lab is to really have the institutions do the running around and the parents able to keep still,” he said. “They have the least flexibility of all of us, and yet we require that they do the most running around.”

With help from its partners, Ysaguirre hopes to help parents learn to be more effective leaders and providers, “because the best way out of poverty is actually money,” he said with a laugh.

Bill McGonagle, administrator for the Boston Housing Authority, said he would be happy to see the learning lab help families move up the economic ladder. “That would be a huge success story,” he said.

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Its construction on the former site of the Martha Eliot Health Center — which sat derelict for years after a new center was constructed nearby in 1996 — removes “the last uninhabitable, boarded-up building in public housing throughout city of Boston,” McGonagle said.

That’s a significant milestone in itself, McGonagle said, recalling the “thousands of boarded-up public housing units” in the city a few decades ago. “Today there are none,” he said.



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The Nurtury Learning Lab will provide high-quality early education and care, family-support services, professional development, adult education programs, health and wellness programs, community cooking and nutrition classes.

The authority leased the space to Nurtury for 99 years at \$1 a year, as is standard for services that enhance the lives of residents in BHA properties, McGonagle said. Nurtury need not worry about the rent, though. “I’ll be happy to front the buck from my own pocket,” McGonagle joked.

Ysaguirre said he wants at least half the children at the center to come from among the roughly 1,900 residents at Bromley-Heath as well as other public housing developments. To make its services affordable to low-income parents, Nurtury calculates charges on a sliding scale based on income.

That policy won praise from Bromley-Heath resident Noelia Rivera, a mother of two.

“Day care’s expensive,” Rivera, 47, said Saturday. “That’s what these parents need, not to just put out their whole paychecks on day care. It discourages you from working. You might as well stay home.”

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