



Monday, August 19, 2002

## Lowry puts children at core of new building

By **Mary E. Iorio**, OU Writer Oakland University's youngest students will slide into a new setting this week when the Lowry Early Childhood Education Center moves to the new Education and Human Services Building in the heart of campus.

Long located in what once served as chicken coops for Meadow Brook Farm, the nationally accredited Lowry Center took over the lowest level of the new building on Aug. 19. Features include six toddler and pre-school classrooms, two offices, a kitchen, teacher workroom and reception area as well as tighter security. Behind the center, a series of three playscapes offer appropriately sized climbing equipment, slides and swings.

The grand centerpiece, a wide-open multipurpose room, fills the building's atrium and rises four stories. Offering views from above of children playing on a climbing structure and tunnel system, the space will serve as a constant reminder to education majors of why they went into the field.

And that should prove "delightful," says Jim Clatworthy, associate dean of the **School of Education and Human Services** (SEHS). "It will be much easier for our education students to have access to the little children at Lowry. It's been difficult with the Lowry Center being located on east campus. It's really almost too far to walk. If the weather was too hot or too cold or just too nasty, they couldn't get there without a car. Now the kids will be right in the building."

For professors and undergraduates, the Lowry Center offers an on-site research lab as well as hands-on experience with young children. The new center will have state-of-the-art video recording equipment in all classrooms and on the playgrounds as a tool for teacher education and research, said Carol Swift, associate professor of human development and child study. Professors hope to record examples of effective, even not-so-effective, lessons as well as normal developmental milestones and then share those observations with college students studying to become teachers. The usage, however, will be carefully monitored and restricted, Swift said.

For the nearly 150 families served annually by Lowry, the new center will continue to offer a developmentally appropriate, play-based learning environment. Teachers share language and literacy experiences, mathematics, science, art, music, movement and dramatic play. The new location will expand opportunities, Clatworthy adds, allowing visits to the library, the performing arts and music departments or the recreation center. Nearby fields and a thick grove of honey locust trees will provide nature experiences.

While Lowry Center Program Director Christine Boisvert-Ashley will miss the quaint, country setting of the current buildings, the new center will offer relief from on-going maintenance issues.

"My office here was once the plucking room," she laughs. "The classroom buildings are really old, so it's a challenge to keep it looking clean, even though it is clean. We have daily problems with lights, plumbing, underground pipes. Our heating system is erratic." The new location should solve all those problems.

The center's charm, however, comes in its scale and sensitivities. Each bathroom offers miniature toilets, just right for the 24- to 40-inch-tall occupants. Counters and sinks stand just a bit shorter than average. Of the more than 100 chairs ordered for the center, just seven are sized to adults. Cots for naptime rise only a few safe inches off the floor, while every classroom offers quiet curtained space for little ones who need longer naps.

"We tried to consider options that would make things easier for young children," said Project Architect Janice Suchan of Duce Simmons Associates. Herself the mother of a toddler, Suchan recommended color-coding classrooms to help young children who can't read find their way. She also noticed immediately when workers began to install built-in water tables too high off the floor. "It just seemed like it would be too high for my daughter," she said, "so we re-measured."

Other built-in features include changing tables, play equipment and a tree-shaped coat rack in the reception area. Each room will have book and reading areas, computer nooks, pretend house spaces, art and block areas and a round rug for circle time. There also are a series of conveniences that will make teachers' lives easier and the center safer:

- A washer/dryer room for laundering dress-up clothes or items dirtied by potty training accidents.
- A keycard and buzzer entry system to provide enhanced security.

- Bathrooms connected to classrooms, rather than down a long hallway as in the current center. “It may seem like a little thing,” Boisvert-Ashley says, “but we spend a lot of time right now taking kids back and forth to the bathroom. They’ll have a lot more independence in the new building.”
- Rubber padding in the sub-floor of the multipurpose room to soften falls. The same is true on the playground, where a springy rubberized surface cushions the ground beneath all equipment.

For parent Madeline Turner, whose sons Gregory, 4, and Machus, 2, have thrived at Lowry, the new building will be a welcome luxury. But, she says, nothing surpasses the quality of the teachers. “The teachers here love what they do. The education students who assist are really dedicated. They’re planning to make it a career, so they want to do the best they can. When my boys are here, I don’t have to worry one iota.”

The Lowry Center for Early Childhood Education is accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. It provides toddler and preschool experiences for children ages 18 months to 5 years. Lowry maintains a teacher/student ratio of 1/3 for toddlers, 1/7 for 3 year olds and 1/8 for 4 year olds.

Core program hours run from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. with half-day options from 9 a.m. to noon or 1 to 4 p.m. Extended care is available from 7:30 to 9 a.m. and 4 to 5:30 p.m. Children must attend at least two core sessions per week.

The center is open to the community but Oakland University students, faculty and staff get first priority. Currently, more than half the children enrolled come from the greater community. Lowry fees run from a low of \$20 per day for a half-day preschool experience to \$40 per day for full-day toddler care. Extended care costs an additional \$5 per half hour.

Lowry will hold a yard sale of toys, play equipment and furniture at its current east campus location on Saturday, Aug. 24, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. The new center will open for tours from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Monday, Aug. 26, through Thursday, Aug. 29. The new academic year begins Sept. 3.

For more information, contact Christine Boisvert-Ashley at (248) 370-4100 or [cboisver@oakland.edu](mailto:cboisver@oakland.edu).

#### **SUMMARY**

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Created by CareTech Administrator ([webservices@caretechsolutions.com](mailto:webservices@caretechsolutions.com)) on Monday, August 19, 2002  
Modified by CareTech Administrator ([webservices@caretechsolutions.com](mailto:webservices@caretechsolutions.com)) on Monday, August 19, 2002  
Article Start Date: Monday, November 3, 2003