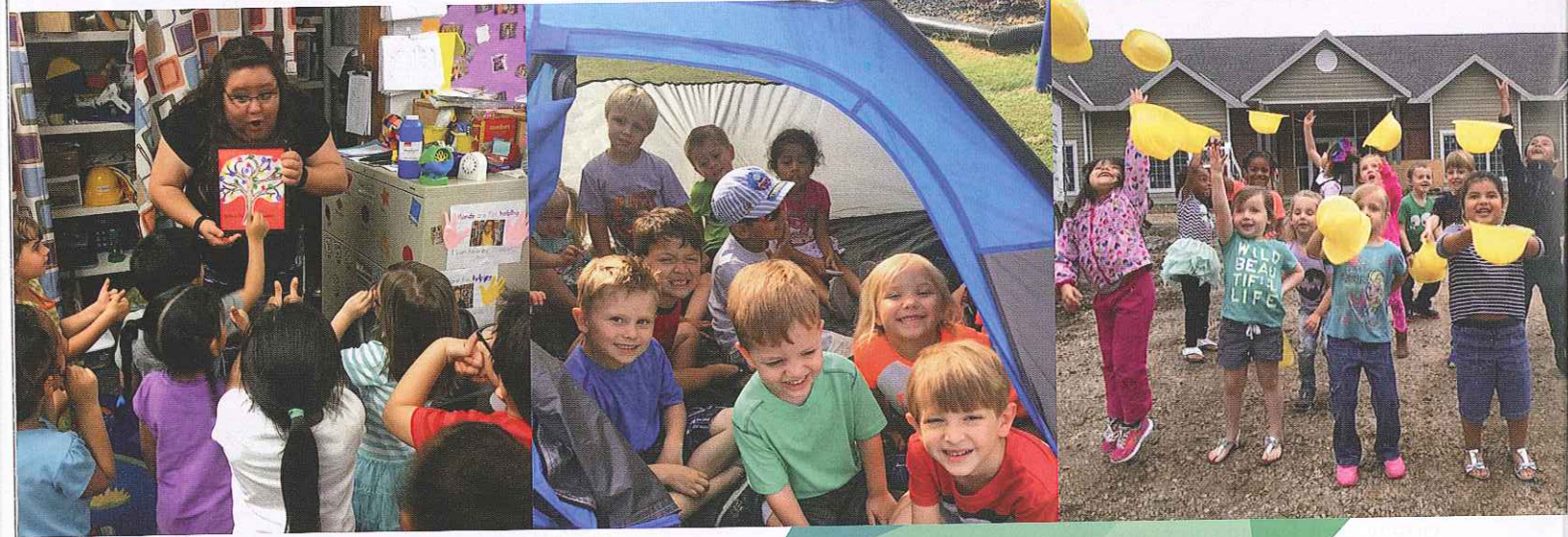


We are in this Together



**By Dr. Craig Correll,
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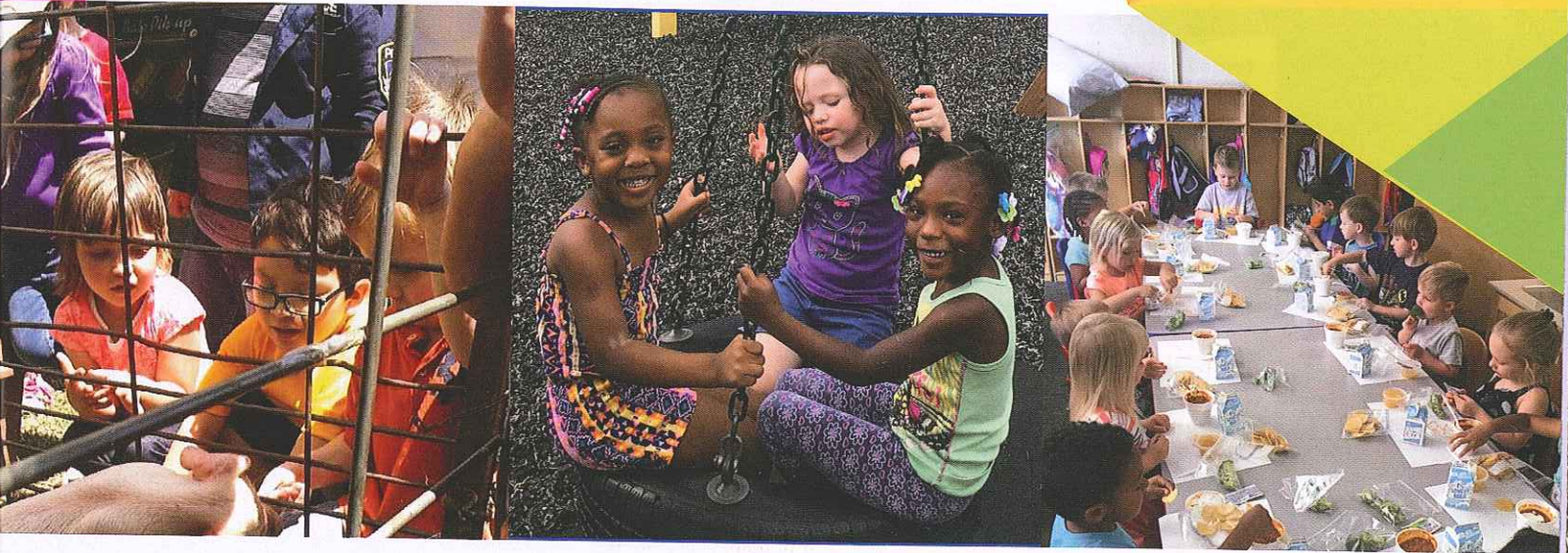
The Dr. Jerry Hamm Early Learning Center held its “official” ribbon cutting ceremony on August 1 — a huge milestone for the children of Coffeyville. While the ribbon cutting signifies a new era in quality, early education, it is really the latest iteration of the center. The blended model currently in operation began eight years ago as a collaboration between four partners.

After a devastating flood in 2007 destroyed more than 400 homes and many businesses, several committees were formed to determine how Coffeyville could rebuild. One major roadblock, according to local businesses, was the lack of quality child care, which quickly prompted a community-wide discussion about quality early education. Leaders from the school district and other entities decided that we all would need to work

together. The district had two, half-day Pre-K rooms, as did Head Start. Tri-County Special Education also operated a classroom for Pre-K students.

Our goal from the beginning was to provide high-quality, universal preschool for all students in Coffeyville. With a grant provided by the Kansas Children’s Cabinet and Trust Fund and additional resources, we remodeled a former elementary school into the Dr. Jerry Hamm Early Learning Center. The center consisted of six, half-day rooms and two, full-day classrooms, all of which were blended with students from each entity.

While we achieved what we originally set out to accomplish, we knew we were not finished. The need for full-day classrooms was growing, as was the need to create before- and after-school care programs, which would aid working parents. Four additional



classrooms were needed, as well as a method to fund the before- and after-school care.

After many meetings with local community leaders, we decided to form a nonprofit organization. This would enable us to apply for tax credits and create a new coalition of local businesses. Rather than looking to a bond campaign through the local school district, the group decided to attempt to raise the needed funds locally from private sources. Barry Downing, of the Wichita TOPs centers, assisted us along the way.

Through the generosity of local donors, the coalition was able to raise \$2.1 million to build the addition to the center. In order to be eligible for child care subsidies, the building was licensed through the Kansas Department of Health and Environment.

The importance of early childhood education cannot be overstated. Students who attend a high-quality early learning program are more than 30 percent less likely to require special education and more than 30 percent more likely to

graduate high school. They also show much greater self-regulation, problem-solving and self-awareness skills. Research also shows these students are 72 percent less likely to be arrested for drug offenses in their lifetimes and 20 percent more likely to be employed.

In a high-poverty area such as Coffeyville, this center could be the catalyst for change the community needs. We have already seen our special education numbers decreasing and children coming to

kindergarten more prepared. A secondary, unintended benefit has been the rallying of the community to be a part of the solution. I truly believe that a school can only be as great as its community, and that a community can only be as great as its schools. We are all in this together. ■

