Readiness for All

East Hampton Union Free School District, East Hampton, N.Y.

The East Hampton Preschool Collaboration, which provides free prekindergarten classes to all residents’ children and optional half-day child care for working parents, belies its community’s reputation as a summer playground for the rich and famous.

While the wealthy may vacation there, East Hampton has a culturally, ethnically, and economically diverse year-round community. The small town’s 31-percent minority population is increasing. Cost of living in the area is high.

School officials recognized the urgent need for better day care as some 5-year-olds started entering kindergarten less prepared than their peers. The differences tended to break down along economic, racial, and ethnic lines. More research showed that the disparities in school readiness resulted in many children falling further and further behind academically each year.

East Hampton leaders joined forces to find a solution. The community considered recent changes in local demographics, family structure, and work patterns for women in developing the East Hampton Preschool Collaboration.

“The school board members were involved as community leaders,” says Superintendent Raymond Gualtieri. “A way to enhance the quality of our educational program in this community was to provide high-quality early childhood experiences and at the same time to provide a viable safe alternative for working parents so that they had a safe, nurturing environment in which their preschool children could be while they’re at work.”

Isolated on the south fork of Long Island, East Hampton realized it really lacked adequate day care, Gualtieri says. So the community cooperated to build what U.S. Sen. Hillary Clinton has called “a national model.”

The school district provided the land. The town government financed the building. Private donors chipped in.

“It shows what you can do when you do this kind of collaborative thing,” Gualtieri says. “I don’t know that the board could have done this by themselves. I don’t know that the town of East Hampton could have done this by itself. I don’t know that the private donors could have done this by themselves.”

An outreach component brings in parents. Known as Parent University, it offers workshops, a parent library, and other assistance, Gualtieri says.

The project has been so successful that even celebrities support it. Actor Alec Baldwin donated his $250,000 fee from an April 2003 appearance on “Hollywood Squares.”

“I appeared on the show to benefit the center,” Baldwin said in a Spring 2003 interview with the center’s newsletter, The Gingerbread Gazette. “Day care is crucial for single and working parents in East Hampton who cannot stay home.”

For more information, contact Raymond D. Gualtieri, superintendent, at (631) 329-4104, or by e-mail at rgualtieri@ehufsd.org. The district’s Web site is www.ehufsd.org.