



Eliana Massing



*OU's Institute of Child Development returns to campus with a new facility and 87 years of educational experience.*

# A Preschooler's

**O**n a cold, drizzly day, Chelsea Shaeffer's youngest child is likely outside jumping in rain puddles or making mud pies during preschool at the University of Oklahoma's Jeannine Rainbolt College of Education Institute of Child Development.

Shaeffer doesn't mind the muddy shoes or the inclement weather. She understands the importance of outdoor play. She's seen the benefits in her two older children who attended the institute, or ICD, and as a former ICD preschooler herself, she knows it firsthand.

Since the school opened in 1935, families like Shaeffer's have enjoyed the many benefits of attending ICD. The nonprofit preschool is attractive to families because of its reputation for excellence and heavy focus on child-directed learning philosophies such as Montessori and Reggio Emilia. The school is nationally accredited and holds a 3-star rating, the highest awarded by the Oklahoma Department of Human Services.

Becca Waggoner, ICD director, says it's not uncommon for generations of families to hold ties to ICD, whether it be as a preschooler, an early childhood education major, a teacher, or all three. She is hoping to serve generations more in ICD's new building at 2727 Asp Ave., south of OU's main campus. The new space—which currently serves 60 children ages 2 to 4—opened in late August and offers expanded options for families.

"Ten years ago when I started, we had one classroom," Waggoner says. "Now we have three classrooms, and we've extended our daily hours by 30 minutes. We also added an extended-day option for parents three days a week. That's brand new this year."

The school, which became a part of OU's early childhood education program in the 1980s, also functions as a laboratory for students during their junior year, a practicum site for graduate students, and provides research opportunities for OU faculty.

A former early childhood major herself, Shaeffer says she spent two semesters in the lab as a college student, as did Waggoner; her assistant director, Kitty Sylvester; and numerous ICD teachers, both past and present.

"I've told many a person, 'ICD is such a magical place. It's kind of like this utopian school,'" Shaeffer says as both an ICD parent and student alumna. "I think teachers who come out of here are going to make a big difference."

In addition to increased classroom space and the opportunity for future expansion, the new building offers an observation booth, as well as areas in which to teach early childhood education classes.

The availability of such valuable teaching tools has fluctuated as ICD moved over the decades. Most recently, ICD was off campus for six years and lacked space for an observation booth.

"This building allows us to get back to that model," Waggoner says. "Even parents will come over to the booth and watch their children so they can see how they're adjusting socially in the classroom and what they're learning." ►

BY TAMI ALTHOFF

# Paradise



Travis Caperton

Both princess and baker, a student makes her own unique brand of cupcakes in the institute's outdoor "mud kitchen."

But one of the most exciting additions at the new space, she says, is an expansive outdoor play area. Under the direction of Waggoner, OU Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture Sarah Little, and Drusa B. Cable Endowed Chair Kyong-Ah Kwon, students from the College of Education and OU's Christopher C. Gibbs College of Architecture worked together to create a design for the low-cost, eco-friendly, sustainable space, all while providing an environment that keeps children safe as they take risks exploring.

The final design was chosen by Little and a group of faculty, including OU education professors Courtney Dewhirst and Erin Casey. "The collaborative nature of the project is really unprecedented," Little says, adding that landscaping and natural elements will be incorporated into the space over time as funding allows.

While the design utilized the expertise of OU students, ICD preschoolers themselves had a hand in deciding playground details, such as a swing, hill slide and tricycle path.

"We've never had a playground this size," Waggoner says. "Outdoor learning environments have been so important to us since ICD was established, but we've never had space that we could really utilize in this way."

She points out several features that include a drive-through tricycle storage shed with a "peek-a-boo" door, "mud kitchens" that promote pretend play using dirt and sand, raised gardening beds, and a child-sized bridge that also provides water runoff. "There's a lot of fun stuff happening here."

The playground design project was born out of OU's Happy Child Project, an interdisciplinary intervention and evaluation research project that studies the role of outdoor environments in child learning and well-being. The Happy Child Project encompasses researchers from multiple disciplines, including early childhood education, landscape architecture, counseling, psychology, occupational therapy, biomedical engineering and science education, says Kwon, who also serves as an associate professor at OU-Tulsa.

Kwon says the new playground will help children and educators by offering opportunities for innovative research to take place.

"Outdoor play experiences, particularly in the natural environment, produce numerous benefits for whole-child development. However, there is a lack of holistic, low-cost, nature-based outdoor play interventions for children from urban and low-income communities, especially with a rigorous research design and methods," she says.

"The purpose of the Happy Child Project is to develop and test the effects of such interventions on improving children's learning and well-being—as well as teachers' engagement in supporting children from low-income households in early childhood settings."

Kwon also believes ICD's recent expansion might serve as a marketing tool to recruit future OU faculty, staff and students, as well as increasing their productivity and retention. She says early childhood education faculty conducted three needs assessments for OU faculty, staff and student parents. The surveys received more than 500 responses and found that most have an urgent need to enroll







The ICD playground design is one product of OU's Happy Child Project, which recently was awarded a \$3 million federal grant to expand affordable, high-quality child care to low-income families. Team members are (from left) Courtney Dewhirst, Brittany Hott, Erin Casey, Kyong-Ah Kwon and Rebecca Waggoner.

reductions, family engagement opportunities, and wraparound social services like mental health support and food and baby supplies.

“Despite ICD’s long history and its provision of exemplary education, only a small percentage of children and families have had the opportunity to attend, due to limited funding,” she says. “To serve more children and families from diverse backgrounds, expand the school’s outstanding education, and increase collaborative research and student internship opportuni-



Travis Caperton

Outdoor play is a focus of education at the ICD, where a new tri-cycle path and shed are home to the same trikes used by generations of institute students.

their children in a quality, affordable, on-campus childcare program.

Those needs are the greatest for the parents of infants and toddlers, Kwon says, adding she and colleagues recently were awarded a \$3 million U.S. Department of Education grant to help support extending ICD services to low-income families by adding two infant-toddler classrooms and providing tuition

ties, ICD needs more investment and support.

“The availability of top-notch, affordable care for young children on campus is critical for the success of faculty, staff and students. The essence of quality care is highly qualified, well-trained teachers with appropriate compensation, support and appreciation. We’re seeking more investment and resources to achieve that goal.”

Although its new building has allowed the institute to add classes and expand its staff to six teachers, Waggoner says her dreams for ICD’s future don’t end there. She, too, wants to see additional classrooms and, perhaps, additional age levels.

“We want to keep growing—that’s important to us. I think the more that OU undergraduates see developmentally appropriate practice in the classroom, the better they’re going to be when they get out there in the profession,” she says.

“For a long time, ICD has been a best-kept secret in Norman. A lot of people don’t know about us or that we’re not just available to faculty and staff. But people will drive 30 miles to access a first-rate program,” Waggoner explains, adding that the school’s families travel from as far away as Blanchard and Yukon, Okla.

For the first time in six years, those families will be coming to OU’s Norman campus.

“We are so happy to be back, with the ambiance of the university all around us,” Waggoner says. “OU is like a family, and it’s really special to be surrounded by family.”

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