

A Message from the Director of Education

“Don’t aspire to make a living, aspire to make a difference.”

—Denzel Washington

Wow! Another year has gone by. As I reflect on this past year, I’m amazed I was blessed to celebrate my thirty-eighth anniversary with the NorthStar family. Blessed, because more than half of my life I have been a part of an agency that strives to be the spark of light for so many families who want the best for their children. I am grateful for all the individuals from NorthStar, past and present, who have inspired me to dream and be a part of building a more cohesive, supportive community for children, youth, and families. It continues to be an honor to work side by side with people who place families and community first. These past thirty-eight years have taught me that anything is possible if you find the courage to step out of your comfort zone and focus on what is best for the community. My experience here at NorthStar has catapulted me into advocating for the common good.

As I think of our new early education building, NorthStar Early Education Academy, I become even more motivated to provide the very best for our families and the community. I’m excited to once again be in a building built specifically for young children. Please understand, I appreciate High Point and Peabody Properties for providing NorthStar with the space to house our early education programs. However, when space is expressly built to honor the importance of young children learning through play, and how the community is interconnected in children’s education, opportunities become endless. As you can see, I may be proud of the work we have done this past year, but I am also so excited for what is to come in our new NorthStar Early Education Academy facility.

Respectfully

Jennie Antunes

Children served in fiscal year 2024

(July 2023-June 2024)

Infant: 1

Toddler: 20

Preschool- aged children: 70

Elementary school students: 61

Grand total of children served: 152

***Children transferred to NorthStar after termination
from other programs. 13***

Families served - 147

Annual Report

Early Education and Afterschool Programs

As we continue to strive to offer a high-quality early education program for our children and their families, we recognize learning is a continuous journey, not only for the children, but also for our early educators. Professional development plays a significant role for all of us to assure we are keeping up with the latest research and best practices. NorthStar remains diligent in maintaining our accreditation from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). This past March our Shawmut Avenue early education program was reaccredited by NAEYC.

The community plays a vital role in helping NorthStar provide high-quality programs; therefore, we are continually developing new community partnerships as well as maintaining our current interagency relationships. The University of Massachusetts Dartmouth's Jumpstart program, the Community Preschool Partnership Initiative, Birth to Three, the Kennedy Donovan Early Intervention program, Manifest of Love, Round the Bend, the Justice Resource Institute, the state Department of Children and Families, Growing Literacy Equity Across Massachusetts, and the New Bedford Public Schools are some of the partnerships that enable us to better serve our children and families.

The expulsion of children with behavior problems from early education and afterschool programs remains a problem that is generally overlooked. In contrast, with our "never give up," "do whatever it takes" principles and policy, we remain committed to retain children in our programs, regardless of the challenges they present.

Once again, too many children were enrolled in our programs due to expulsion from other programs. What message do we want our children to receive? You are not worth our time, or you cannot be a part of our community; it does not make sense—let's make sure we do everything possible before expulsion is even considered. This year, eleven children were enrolled in our programs after being expelled from other area programs. Within our early education and afterschool programs, trauma-informed trainings are provided to support our educational teams in reaching and engaging children with problem behaviors. This work is not for the fragile; it requires consistency, diligence, and an open mind to think outside of the box. Every child is different, and the tools used cannot be the same for all; that would be a disservice.

As I often reiterate to staff, no one person is more important than another when working with children and families; titles don't carry weight, but trusting relationships do. All of us play a significant role in building positive, trusting relationships with each family member. As we work as a team, there is no stopping the array of possibilities created for children and families—just by letting them know we see them, we respect them, and we honor them.

Students Moving on to Kindergarten

Of our 24 preschoolers who moved on to kindergarten, 96% were assessed by the district as being kindergarten ready—even when facing challenges like poverty, family instability, exposure to trauma, or developmental delays. Virtually all our enrolled children live in low-income households—widely cited as a risk factor for school failure. Our preschool-to-school success rate can be attributed to the passion, commitment, and expertise of our educators as they focus on the development of the whole child—building not only their academic skills, but also their interpersonal skills, confidence, self-esteem, problem-solving, empathy, and curiosity, and sense of a community.

Pyramid Model Implementation

Studies show that healthy social-emotional skill development is key to young children succeeding in school. NorthStar continues to employ the research-backed Pyramid Model to promote children’s social-emotional skill development. Using the Pyramid Model, our educators embed social-emotional skill-building in many facets of children’s daily program experiences. Although the Pyramid Model focuses mainly on birth to kindergarten, the afterschool staff have adapted some of the Pyramid Model tools to help our school-age children work on their social-emotional skills. April Bernard, our center director at our Shawmut Avenue site, and I participated in the Teaching Pyramid Infant-Toddler Observation Scale (TIPTOS) rating training, receiving our certifications as “reliable raters.” We are now better equipped to support our infant and toddler education teams as we observe in a more informed way the classroom environment, teaching, and interactions. Our hope is we will be able to participate in the Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool for Preschool (TPOT) reliable rater version this coming year.

Early Education Family Engagement

Open communication and positive relationships with educators are vital to building trust with parents. Families are welcomed to pop in and visit our programs at any time. We understand the importance of families’ confidence in leaving their child in the teachers’ hands—confident that the staff will safely and warmly care for their child. Families are encouraged to participate in any way that is comfortable for them; it may be coming in and reading a book, getting on the floor with the children and playing a game, or simply sitting in the room observing. Regardless of a family’s level of participation, they are a part of the NorthStar family. This past year, some of our most attended family engagement activities were Carnival Day, Music with Tunes, a story and activity with Mrs. Santos from the Zeiterion Theater, and a fun day with High Point enjoying pony rides and a petting zoo.

Commonwealth Preschool Partnership Initiative (CPPI)

Along with three other community-based early education programs, NorthStar has continued to participate in the Commonwealth Preschool Partnership Initiative (CPPI). Located at our Rivet Street site, our CPPI classroom is licensed for sixteen children. Our other preschoolers served at our Shawmut Avenue site also benefit from us being a part of CPPI. Any NorthStar-enrolled

preschooler who has an Individual Education Plan (IEP) is able to receive services from the New Bedford Public Schools at one of our sites. The district interim team is made up of a special education teacher, occupational therapist, and a speech pathologist. The educators working in the CPPI classroom have a multitude of professional development supports, including study groups with other community partners and New Bedford Public school preschool teachers, and a coach who works closely with the teachers as they review the array of classroom assessments and set goals for themselves and their classroom. Three classroom assessments are completed twice a year: the Early Childhood Rating Scale (ECERS), the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), and the Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool, (TPOT). These assessments ensure that best practices are taking place and, as the educators review the assessments, they are able to see their strengths and areas in which they can improve.

Since the launching of CPPI in New Bedford, it had always been a dream to have all the preschool teachers from the New Bedford Public Schools and all educators from the community early childhood education partners to participate in a staff development day. Six years later this dream was realized. Through funding from this grant, along with additional financial support from Senator Montigny's Children's Equity and Empowerment Fund and United Way of Greater New Bedford, two hundred educators were able to gather together and participate in a professional development day. Another priority for CPPI is increasing access to affordable, high-quality preschool. NorthStar was able to assist four families with tuition through funding from this grant. Some participating families reported that if it wasn't for the financial assistance they received, they would have had to take their child out of the program.

SCHOONER

This past year high staff turnover in our afterschool program resulted in almost an entire new staff of group leaders and assistant leaders. Jaden Gonsalves, our only seasoned group leader, has stepped up and has been directing our four new NorthStar staff members. SCHOONER has gone through some growing pains as each new leader embarks on a self-discovery journey to discern what their strengths are and what areas of growth they would like the SCHOONER program to focus on. All of our afterschool students were promoted to their next grade; research supports that participation in a well-structured afterschool program can significantly improve a student's chances of grade promotion. The staff have worked on providing learning experiences beyond homework time. You can walk into one of the classrooms and hear a room full of laughter as students work on their spelling and math skills through games. Although the children can be quite competitive, they also have been cheering each other on as they compete in game-playing. Using this and other strategies, staff have created a positive program environment, with a sense of belonging and community.

Goals for the Upcoming Year

Some goals we have set for the coming year are:

- Achieve a smooth transition to the new NorthStar Education Academy facility, where we will significantly increase enrollment and serve as a model program;
- Establish and implement an afterschool social-emotional curriculum that focuses on teaching skills such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making;
- Bring artists into our early education and afterschool programs to develop and offer curriculum-based environments and experiences in dance, music, theater and visual arts that help children learn to problem-solve, work together, and seek creative means toward common goals.