

# THE TENNESSEAN

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## Starting kids off right

*Community Foundation invests in children 3 and under to instill a love of learning and stem dropout problem*

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"Let us begin with a bold statement that we believe to be undeniably true. As a society, and more specifically as the Nashville community, if we do not take the action that we are about to propose, then:

"We cannot break the cycle of poverty.

"We cannot solve our drug problems.

"We cannot solve our incarceration problems.

"We cannot solve many of our health-care cost problems.

"We cannot create the economic climate that we all desire.

"And we cannot attain an acceptable K-12 public education system in our community.

"The premise is basic. As we look at the learning process of the children of our community, let us focus on what occurs in our public education system K-12. When we see almost one-third of our kids becoming dropouts, we regretfully admit that the system is broken. We also understand that it is from this dropout group that most of the problems we have previously listed are germinated."

— Nelson Andrews, at the time a member of the Early Childhood Education Steering Committee and former chairman of The Community Foundation of Middle Tennessee

You could see it in the eyes and on the faces of the little ones present at the Grace M. Eaton Child Care and Parent Resource Center on this particular Friday — they were in a happy, learning and loving environment.

They smiled, they spoke and they seemed eager to learn.

"We try to make sure our children are prepared for the outside world when they leave here," said Mahalia Howard, executive director of Grace M. Eaton, which was established in 1926 and is a United Way agency at 1708 Pearl St. "We have 95 children right now, and we partner with Vanderbilt, Tennessee State University, Meharry and Centerstone. Students from the various colleges volunteer to work with our children."

What Howard also says on this particular day is that three of the children enrolled at Grace M. Eaton are recipients of The Community Foundation of Middle Tennessee's Early Childhood Education Scholarship Initiative.

The foundation recently awarded its 14th scholarship to children from birth to 3 years old. Foundation officials say the children are attending state-certified, three-star-rated nonprofit day-care centers such as Grace M. Eaton, McNeilly Center for Children, Martha O'Bryan Center, **Bethlehem Center** and others.

"Nelson Andrews had invested himself so much in the plight of everyone in our society, and he had a real heart for education," Cal Turner Jr., chairman of the Cal Turner Family Foundation, said of Andrews, a renowned businessman and philanthropist who died here June 13 at age 82 after a long battle with leukemia.

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It was Andrews' dream that the early childhood education scholarships become a part of The Community Foundation of Middle Tennessee mission.

"Nelson rightly concluded that the very early years of childhood are the important years for us to get human potential ready to be educated and developed," said Turner, whose foundation gave The Community Foundation of Middle Tennessee seed money to get the scholarship initiative off the ground. "He was chairman of The Community Foundation, who had that real passion for the scholarship fund.

"Our family foundation was honored to help. If we don't intervene at early, early ages, then we lose our kids and the cost is enormous for society."

That's also a belief for Dr. Henry Foster, professor emeritus and former dean and vice president for health services at Meharry Medical College and clinical professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Vanderbilt University Medical Center.

"Beyond any question, it's important because the first three years of life is a critical time in language formation, fine motor formation, socialization, and these things can get lost," Foster said during a telephone interview.

"President (Barack) Obama understands the value of early education. And the Head Start program is wonderful, but the children are handicapped so many times when they get to Head Start." For almost 45 years, the Head Start program has been educating 3- and 4-year-olds from low-income families around the nation.

Foster, who was nominated by President Bill Clinton in 1995 to be the nation's surgeon general, said early childhood education is so important.

"It's just so critical," he said. "I look at my own grandchildren and the kind of exposure they get. It's just such a critical time. We call it a narrow window of opportunity. These scholarships are just beautiful. We met recently over at Grace M. Eaton, and some of the children greeted us and sang to us in 10 different languages."

Goal is 100 scholarships

Foster, who has been involved with The Community Foundation's scholarship initiative since the beginning, said the goal right now is to eventually award 100 scholarships. Foundation officials say the majority of children being helped are children of the "working poor," a designation for families earning \$18,000-\$24,000 annually. These are families, officials said, who earn too much to receive financial assistance from the state, but for whom quality care would be nearly impossible to afford.

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"These scholarships and opportunities help the children, but it has far-reaching economic benefits," Foster said. "When children don't get this kind of early nurturing, the odds of them getting into the penal system are much greater and, in the long run, that's going to be more costly."

Ellen Lehman, president of The Community Foundation, agrees.

"The Community Foundation constantly looks for gaps and unmet needs and opportunities, and places where we can add unique value. Sometimes ideas for how we can help come from donors who have a vision and sometimes they come from board members," Lehman said.

Lehman said the foundation's scholarship initiative is so important because it helps to bring about equity and fair play.

"We want these children who are awarded these scholarships to have the same opportunities that our children have," she added. "If we want to have an impact on such things as the high school dropout rate, we have to make sure these kids have the tools to succeed.  
Statewide growth envisioned

Lehman said one of Andrews' dreams was to create a program, such as the scholarship initiative, that would serve almost as a pilot project and then have it picked up in Tennessee, from Mountain City to Memphis.

"Most people look at the public education system and decide it's broken when kids drop out of high school," Lehman said. "It's broken at earlier stages. Our goal is to see that these children are prepared when they enter pre-K, and then they will have a chance to succeed."

Howard, the executive director at Grace M. Eaton, tells about a child who had come to the center who was well under 1 year old and who left at 15 months old. When a 16-month-old child arrived and had not been exposed to the things the 15-month-old had been exposed to, you could see the difference, she said.

And Howard added that while some children receive the scholarship money from The Community Foundation, their parents still have to make some payments, as well, to help meet the total cost.

"We have a sliding fee, but for an infant the cost is approximately \$235 a week. Without the scholarship, some parents would not be able to afford such a chance, and they might fall behind. We don't want that to happen. What we want is a chance to try our best to make sure children succeed."

And that, Foster said, is critical. "We are trying to level the playing field with these kids."