

NORTHWEST ARKANSAS Democrat Gazette

Bentonville's Helen Walton Children's Enrichment Center breaks ground

By [Melissa Gute](#)

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NWA Democrat-Gazette/CHARLIE KAIJO Kyle Peterson director of the Walton Family Foundation, speaks Thursday in front of Crystal Bridges in Bentonville. The Helen Walton Children's Enrichment Center broke ground on its new facility in Bentonville.

BENTONVILLE -- An education and training center broke ground on its new facility Thursday, which will help its work toward getting all of Northwest Arkansas early childhood programs state-quality accredited.

It will be on 8 acres on Southeast J Street, south of Scott Family Amazeum and east of Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art.

The Children's Enrichment Center was founded in 1982 to meet the need of a high-quality, early learning center in Bentonville. It developed the Early Childhood Initiative Center in 2009 to collaborate with other centers in the region to elevate the quality of early education across Northwest Arkansas.

The center's building at 1701 N.E. Wildcat Way has been expanded four times.

The center will continue to serve 240 children, officials have said. The new building will increase the number of classrooms from 18 to 21, which will allow for the expansion of the quality of service, not number of children served.

"Today we get to take what's been on paper for the last couple of years and go vertical," Michelle Barnes, executive director, told a crowd of about 200 at the ceremony. "We are so excited. If only this weather could hold out for another 12 to 14 months, that'd be terrific," she said, referring to the anticipated time to construct the building.

The building's entrance will face north. It has a central gathering space where three educational wings and one training/administrative wing will stem from. It will have outdoor play areas incorporated between the wings.

"The design of the building was to use the architecture to foster a greater sense of the community at multiple levels," Paul Lewis, partner of New York-based LTL Architects, said after the ceremony. "This is an important part of the past, for this (Walton) family and our (Walton Family) foundation and this community," Peterson said. "It's a glorious fundamental part of our future."

LTL Architects is a New York firm selected through the Walton Family Foundation's Northwest Arkansas Design Excellence Program, a program seeking to elevate the quality of architectural and landscape design in Northwest Arkansas.

Scape/Landscape Architecture from New York, East Harding Construction from Little Rock, Hight Jackson Associates from Rogers and Larry Lott with Harrison French & Associates from Bentonville also worked on the project.

The classrooms are designed to look like a house and provide a home-away-from-home feel, he said. Large screen porches will allow the classrooms to expand outside while still providing protection.

The collective meeting area will enable the center to better serve as an educational facility for other early childhood education programs, he added.

The new Early Childhood Initiatives Center will feature an expanded training center, a computer lab, library for curriculum, a collaboration room, resource center, remote training for distant centers and an open plan with flexible space to allow for growth.

The center's goal is to help every childhood development center in Northwest Arkansas obtain state accreditation so every child in the region has the opportunity to high-quality early education, according to the organization.

"The building itself is a model school for Northwest Arkansas, Arkansas and ideally for the entire country," Lewis said.

Julie McKenzie, CEO of Welspun USA, shared her story of when her children attended the center in the 1990s and said the staff and other parents became friends and mentors.

"Even back then, the Helen Walton Children's Center wasn't just a daycare," she said. "Curriculum was baked into everything they did."

McKenzie also announced Welspun, a textile products company, was going to provide the center's linens as well as sponsor the pond walking path that will wind around a detention pond that backs up to 18 acres of woods.

The sponsorship was \$25,000, according to center promotional material. The path will allow children to discover squirrels, deer, rabbits and birds in their natural habitat.

The center will help businesses recruit employees and allow women with young children to remain in the workforce, which is important as businesses seek tenure of their employees, said John Furner, president and CEO of Sam's Club.

He quoted statistics that more than 70 percent of women who have children younger than 5 still work and children who receive quality care early in life are three times more likely to graduate high school and twice as likely to receive an advanced degree.

"This is a game changer and a life changer for a lot of people," Furner said of the center.

Kyle Peterson, executive director of the Walton Family Foundation, gave a history of Helen Walton's work to bring community leaders together to provide a place where young children could get the right care to set them up for a successful future.

Paul Stolt, marketing manager for Amazeum, and Diane Carroll, director of communications at Crystal Bridges, welcomed the Enrichment and Initiative Center to the neighborhood.

"For us, it's like having one of your best friends move in next door and you can't wait for them to join you in the sandbox," Stolt said.

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Campaign status

Helen Walton Children's Enrichment Center and Early Childhood Initiatives Center is still looking to raise \$1.2 million to meet its \$16.5 million It Takes A Village To Raise A Child campaign goal. Anyone interested in making a donation or sponsorship should contact Sunny Lane or Kristen Herbert at (479) 273-3552.

Source: Staff report